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Seeking a Spiritual Center: Mass-Market Books and Liberal Religion in America, 1921-1948

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Seeking a Spiritual Center: Mass-Market Books and Liberal Religion in America, 1921-1948

by

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Dedication

To Sarah

Have you ever considered what a sacred thing a book is? Have you ever considered what a sacred trust is ours who deal intimately with the circulation of books? Is there one of us but knows of the change made in the life of another because of a good book placed in his ready hands?

—Eugene Exman, Religious Books Editor, Harper & Brothers, 1955

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Seeking a Spiritual Center: Mass-Market Books and Liberal Religion in America, 1921-1948

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In the decade after World War I, liberal Protestant leaders, executives of the American publishing industry, and other important cultural figures collaborated to promote the buying and reading of religious books in the United States. Aware of the psychic and spiritual dislocations wrought by mass culture, increasing consumerism, and the profusion of new scientific and theological knowledge, these cultural leaders sought to guide American moderns through these troubled times by offering their expertise in the field of religious reading. The various reading campaigns they crafted—Religious Book Week in the 1920s, the Religious Book Club, founded in 1927, and the Religious Books Round Table of the American Library Association—formed the basis of a thriving religious middlebrow culture that remained a central force in American cultural and religious life through the middle decades of the twentieth century. The clergy, seminary professors, publishers, librarians, booksellers, and critics who became the arbiters of this middlebrow culture sought to define a national spiritual center that would hold together a

fragmenting society, create new markets for books, and maintain their privileged status in American religious discourse. What emerged were not only new structures for the promotion of reading, but also an enhanced emphasis on spiritual forms emerging from the margins of liberal Protestantism, especially mystical and psychological spiritualities. The Second World War brought about a significant new phase in the course of religious middlebrow culture. As political leaders declared "books as weapons in the war of ideas," an interfaith organization, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, became the central broker of religious middlebrow reading, coordinating the massive, nationwide Religious Book Week campaign that ran from 1943 to 1948. This reading program built on the foundation of mystical and psychological spirituality formed in the 1920s and 1930s to encourage and facilitate interfaith exchange as the basis of modern American spirituality in the face of new ideological threats from abroad. These developments in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s laid the foundation for a culture of spiritual seeking that had lasting implications for middle-class American religious beliefs and practices for the remainder of the twentieth century.

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Introduction

In 1921, the Quaker historian, philosopher, and activist Rufus Jones wrote a brief article, "The Habit of Reading," to promote a national program known as Religious Book Week.[1] Jones used the essay to initiate his readers into the mysteries of serious, earnest, religious reading and book buying. He began by lamenting the poor reading habits of most Americans, and noted, ominously, the impressive "experiment made by many of the new cults in America. They grow, expand, and flourish," he wrote, "largely through the use of books." Christians needed to be just as diligent, especially since, with the recent expansion in religious publishing and book promotion, "[t]here exists today within the reach of everybody who can read a very remarkable assortment of transforming and enlightening books." Among the many worthwhile kinds of religious books available, Jones cited biography, biblical criticism, and especially texts exploring the implications of modern scientific and historical inquiry for persons of faith. As a historian and student of psychology himself, Jones implored, "No Christian man or woman today can afford to miss the fresh and vivifying light which will come to religious faith from . . . writers who unite great faith with exact and profound knowledge."

Jones aimed not only to make his readers aware of important new religious books, but also to advocate particular ways of reading those books, and particular ways of relating to the entire marketplace of books. "It is not enough to read capriciously and sporadically, to borrow a book occasionally and then have done with it," he argued. "I

[1] Rufus M. Jones, "The Habit of Reading," *The Watchword* (Dayton, OH), March 13, 1921.

am pleading for the ownership of books and for *the cultivation of the habit of reading*" (italics original). Proper religious reading, for Jones, meant reading in a very specific manner. "The true and effective way to read an illuminating book," he counseled, "is to read it, pencil in hand, to mark cardinal passages, to make notes, and to digest the message which the book contributes." Jones then added, just to make sure his point was clear: "That means that the book ought, if possible, to be owned rather than borrowed." Book buying might, incidentally, through the laws of supply and demand, stimulate the writing of more and better religious books, but for Jones the primary benefit of proper book reading and buying was personal. One must own religious books because "[o]ne needs to go back again and again to a good book, to reread marked passages, and to become literally possessed of it." A good book can possess us, according to Jones, only if we first possess it.

Most of what follows stems in some fashion from Jones's short essay. This project, in fact, can fairly be understood as an effort to unpack, describe, and analyze all the cultural historical jewels this treasure chest of an essay contains. In the course of one page of newspaper print, Jones spoke to a vast array of themes central to American cultural and religious history in the second quarter of the twentieth century: the place of religious reading in the rise of middlebrow culture; the impact of consumer culture on religious reading habits and personal spirituality; the slipping cultural influence of liberal Protestantism and the rise of alternative spiritualities; the continuing tension between authority and innovation, between expertise and agency, in America's spiritual democracy; the search for a common spiritual idiom in a pluralistic society; and the elusive, often misunderstood, but very real phenomenon of secularization. By tracing

these themes through three critical decades, we can better understand not just the implications of Jones's short essay, but also, much more broadly, the critical place of religious books in American cultural life at mid-century, and how those books, the book business, and the entire middlebrow reading culture that sustained them shaped the course of spiritual and religious life for millions of middle-class Americans.

MIDDLEBROW CULTURE

This project examines the production, marketing, and reception of books that offered religious interpretations of the problem of the modern self. The bookends of this project are two distinct promotional campaigns, each called Religious Book Week—the first, organized by the National Association of Book Publishers, began in 1921, and the second, coordinated by the National Conference of Christians and Jews, ran through much of the 1940s and concluded in 1948. I investigate mass-marketed religious non-fiction from 1921 to 1948 with the aim of understanding the place of books and the book business—and therefore mass culture and consumerism more broadly—in shaping spirituality, and how the search for a national spiritual consensus changed over the course of these decades. The narrative weaves together strands of publishing history; author biography; textual analysis; distribution and marketing analysis, including book clubs, promotional campaigns, and advertising; and critical and reader reception. This project, in other words, situates a rather narrow examination of the bestselling books of liberal religion in this period within the broad framework of print culture studies, moving back and forth from production to reception, always with an eye for the ways the apparatus of

the culture industry shaped the kinds of meanings available to readers in the act of reading. I hope, therefore, to contribute to ongoing conversations in American cultural history, in the history of reading and the book, and in religious studies, particularly the history of spirituality in America.

The most significant force shaping middle-class reading practices in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s was what scholars of popular literature call "middlebrow culture." Middlebrow literary culture arose in the early twentieth century as middle-class Americans anxiously engaged with the emerging mass culture, hoping to solidify their tenuous social status with cultural markers acquired through reading the "right" books. But middlebrow culture was not simply "other directed," to use David Riesman's term. Middlebrow readers also toiled for inner reasons, to use the resources provided by an expanding cultural and intellectual marketplace to better understand themselves and their place in the modern world. Lawrence Levine and Michael Kammen have explored, in wide-ranging studies, questions of cultural hierarchy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; Joan Shelly Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* and Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books* are the most celebrated efforts to compass, more narrowly, the landscape of middlebrow literary culture in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.[2] This study extends their

[2] Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). On cultural hierarchy and middlebrow in America, see also Megan Benton, *Beauty and the Book: Fine Editions and Cultural Distinction in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000);

work by highlighting the making of a *religious* middlebrow culture in the same period, and by exploring how the rules of religious middlebrow culture shaped reading practices, religious life, and spirituality.

Middlebrow, as I use the term, refers to avenues of marketing and distribution, and modes and aims of reading. In other words, middlebrow describes a dialogical relationship of consumers and producers, of readers and those who tried to shape reading, in the marketplace of print. Many critics reject the term middlebrow for its roots in nineteenth-century phrenological pseudo-science—and therefore "scientific racism"—and for the way it was resurrected for cultural snobbery, tied to hierarchies of race, class, and gender, in the twentieth century. Dwight Macdonald's famous screed decrying "Masscult and Midcult" from the *Partisan Review* in 1960, and other scathing accounts from Clement Greenberg and Virginia Woolf, in addition, sealed in many minds the idea of middlebrow as debased high culture, and even as dangerous to cultural and intellectual vitality in America. With the rise of popular culture studies in recent decades, the academy is still divided between those who embrace the study of popular cultural forms, including middlebrow literature, and those who recoil in horror. Indeed, as a term for classifying authors and texts—as if a food pyramid of literary taste were somehow written on tablets of stone—"middlebrow" offers little of use. But when used to highlight questions about expertise, access to books and learning, the organization of knowledge,

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Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith, eds., *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003); Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); and Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

and reasons for reading, the term retains analytic utility. Middlebrow, in other words, happens in two interrelated ways: in the packaging of a text, especially its presentation by experts to the public; and in the interaction between reader and text, especially the hopes, desires, and fears a reader brings to the act of reading. Those who read inspirational and religious bestsellers in the decades after World War I read them in the context of middlebrow culture, according to middlebrow rules, and for this reason we must understand the culture of middlebrow reading if we hope to understand the print culture of liberal religion in this period.

LIBERAL PROTESTANTISM, PLURALISM, AND THE SEARCH FOR CONSENSUS

The search for a national spiritual consensus initially occurred in explicitly liberal Protestant terms, as the search for a common spiritual vocabulary and a universal essence of religious experience. The landmark text for this body of literature was William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, first published in 1902. James's framework presents obvious shortcomings to twenty-first century scholars of comparative religion—in short, James universalized liberal Protestant assumptions about the nature of religion. Nevertheless, *Varieties* functioned marvelously as a psychology of religion designed specifically to help twentieth-century Protestant moderns retain spiritual vitality. Later American inspirational writers turned to James precisely because of his applicability to those seeking meaning, happiness, and wholeness in a modern, consumerist, psychologically oriented culture. Not surprisingly, many of the titles of most direct interest to anxious middle-class consumers were books explicitly about religion,

psychology, and the self, for it was just this sort of reading that spoke most directly to the existential crises consumerism wrought.

The foundational importance of Jamesian categories for much of the literature I examine raises fundamental questions about what constitutes "religion" or a "religious book" for the purposes of this study. Leaders in the publishing business themselves, in fact, often wrestled with the question, "What is a religious book?," and by the time of the Second World War the matter assumed even greater exigency as the country faced a grave threat to its democratic and pluralist values. The demographics of the United States in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s simplify the purely definitional problem considerably, since the overwhelming majority of Americans in this period belonged to the three broad families of faith commonly referred to as Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. With immigration severely curtailed between 1924 and 1965—from the passage of the National Origins Act amid post-World War I isolationism to President Johnson's removal of the 1924 quotas in response to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s—American religious demographics remained remarkably stable, dominated by these three faith traditions.

Twentieth-century American Protestants, Catholics, and Jews shared enough in common that a working vocabulary of religion can, for our purposes, stand in place of an abstract definition of religion.[3] For the purposes of this study, religious books are those in

[3] The search for a formal definition of religion has confounded scholars since at least the origins of religious studies as a field of inquiry in the nineteenth century, because almost all proposed definitions stem from *a priori* assertions rooted ultimately in culturally and historically limited starting points. Phenomenological approaches such as mine skirt this

which some of the following words do much of the heavy lifting: God, Jesus, soul, spirit, Bible, faith, Moses, Ten Commandments, morality, salvation, cross, Church, Torah, heaven, immortality, Christ. These terms are all contested and multivalent, and certainly those writing religious books in this period did not use them consistently. These terms also exclude by definition the smattering of American texts in this period from outside the Jewish and Christian traditions. However, they formed a core vocabulary of faith for nearly all Americans, liberal and conservative, in the three decades after World War I. Defenders of religious orthodoxies may contend, and did contend, that certain writers used the vocabulary of faith in non-religious or heretical ways, but such critiques stem from intramural theological squabbles that simply underscore the centrality of these terms to American religious life in this period.[4] This religious consensus became institutionalized in the religious reading program of the National Conference of Christians and Jews during the Second World War, when spiritual unity was seen not simply as morally desirable for individuals, or as a means for a select group to retain cultural dominance, but as essential to national survival. Right religious reading, in this context, became a wartime imperative, necessary to bolster the moral foundation of a pluralistic democracy in peril. The agenda for a national spiritual center— crafted by liberal Protestants beginning in the late nineteenth century, epitomized by William James, and popularized in the various liberal Protestant reading programs and bestsellers of the

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problem by simply looking for the ways subjects lived out what they understood as their religious life in practice, in this case in the practices of writing and reading.

[4] Likewise, texts without these terms were sometimes used in religious ways. See Joan Shelley Rubin, "The Boundaries of American Religious Publishing in the Early Twentieth Century," *Book History* 2, no. 1 (1999): 207-217.

1920s and 1930s—laid the foundation for the efforts in the 1940s to expand this spiritual center to include fully Jews and Roman Catholics.

I frequently refer to the books I study not just as religious books, but also as inspirational and liberal. This is because I am interested in the role of books in shaping spirituality under the conditions of mid-twentieth century consumer culture—and thus in books of personal application. Certainly, as a teacher, I recognize that works of history and philosophy and literature can and often do have personal application for readers, but "how-to" inspirational books offer the cleanest field of study. For similar reasons, my study naturally developed around texts that can broadly be classified as liberal in orientation, meaning open to the latest thought in historical, linguistic, and scientific study. I focus on liberal religious books because they reached bestseller lists much more frequently, and were marketed much more aggressively, than more conservative texts in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. The major New York publishers, for example, published very few, if any, fundamentalist works in the 1920s, nor did the institutions of religious middlebrow culture promote fundamentalist texts with anything like the energy they devoted to liberal ones. I also focus on liberal religion because of my desire to understand adjustments to modernity, science, secularization, and the mass-market. While fundamentalism, too, is a religious innovation constructed in response to modernity, many more middle-class urban Americans in the mid-twentieth century relied on liberal than on fundamentalist interpretations of the problem of the modern self, and these were the Americans whose religious sensibilities shaped the publishing industry in this period. Finally, liberal Protestants in these years simply held the power in publishing, key national

religious institutions, and government that enabled them to set the terms of the debate about a national spiritual center.

The focus on liberal religion, then, developed as a natural outcome of the questions that drove this study, but I am pleased with the result for other reasons. Liberal religion—now often, and somewhat defensively, called progressive religion—continues into the twenty-first century to be more vital than is generally acknowledged; indeed, for all the attention once lavished on the "Protestant mainstream," liberal religion is now understudied. The growing cultural and political power of religious conservatives since the 1970s, a subject worthy of careful scrutiny, has become the focus of a great deal of scholarly and journalistic study in recent years, leaving the fate of liberal religion in the twentieth century less well understood.[5] Much of the cultural and spiritual influence of liberal religion operates today outside of religious institutions, in informal networks, seminars, retreats, the Internet and yes, still, books—though even the institutional life of liberal religion is not dead yet. Looking back at a formative period in the life of liberal religious culture in the United States helps us see where to look for the continuing influence of liberal religion in the twenty-first century.

The cultural importance of liberal religion is clear when we look over the broad sweep of the period from 1921 to 1948. The religious book business is as old as the nation itself—older really, since by most accounts the first book published in North

[5] Two efforts to address this scholarly shortcoming are William R. Hutchinson, ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, Jr., eds., *Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

America was a religious book, *The Whole Booke of Psalms*, commonly referred to as *The Bay Psalm Book*, printed in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1640—yet, for all the years of religious publishing in the United States, the years from 1921-1948 witnessed unparalleled successes. A graph of religious books sales from the 1920s through the 1950s would show a steady, and at times astonishing, growth, and new distribution ventures allowed ever more specialized marketing angles. Following the establishment of the Religious Book Club in 1927, for example, at least fifty religious book clubs were in operation by 1957.[6] The increasing sophistication in marketing and distribution put more books into the hands of more Americans than ever before. The two most important and most successful efforts to promote religious reading among the general public in the twentieth century—the first Religious Book Week, of the 1920s, and the second Religious Book Week, of the 1940s—were organized largely by liberal Protestants and in accordance with liberal Protestant understandings of the role of religion in the national culture.

This remarkable success in promoting book buying and reading, however, was simply not enough to maintain the cultural centrality of the liberal establishment; for all the battles won along the way, the war was lost. Rufus Jones and his contemporaries among the liberal Protestant elite simply could not leverage their positions of power in the institutions of culture to shape the society in the same way previous generations of Protestant leaders had. Jones and his collaborators may have introduced a successful

[6] Eugene Exman, "Religious Book Publishing," in Chandler B. Grannis, ed., *What Happens in Book Publishing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 341.

Religious Book Week, and later a successful Religious Book Club—indeed, the kinds of books Rufus Jones promoted were a vital component of the wider middlebrow literary culture of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s—but liberal Protestantism nevertheless failed to hold its privileged place at the center of American cultural life. In many ways they were the victims of their own success, as their drive for a universal spiritual language and true pluralism—a drive rooted, at its core, in their own sense of Christian ethics as much as in their desire to stay culturally relevant—made their grasp on power increasingly untenable. On this level, my story tells of men and women "seeking a spiritual center" for the culture as a whole who inevitably confronted the ultimate reality that, in the modern world, as Yeats observed, "Turning and turning in the widening gyre / . . . things fall apart; the center cannot hold." The religious leaders, authors, critics, editors, and publishers who sought to define and hold together a spiritual center for a vast continent of a nation, steeped in consumerism, fractured along fault lines of race and gender, class and region, denomination and religious tradition, swam against the tides of history, and tired short of their goal. The modernist faith in the unity of truth met its match in the social realities of American life.[7]

SECULARIZATION AND ALTERNATIVE LITERATURES OF SOUL CARE

A second strand of this story, however, evident when one simply looks in the right places, is as much a story of cultural ascendancy as the tale of institutional liberal

[7] R. Laurence Moore tells a similar tale of Protestant liberals and their ultimately futile efforts to control mass culture, first the movies and later radio. See *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 220-235.

Protestantism is one of decline or dissipation. Alternative spiritual traditions, arising from the fringes of liberal Protestantism in the nineteenth century but eventually spilling well beyond the banks of even that rather wide stream, became central to the literature of the modern self, and the practices of soul care, in the twentieth century.[8] "Seeker spirituality—excitedly eclectic, mystically yearning, perennially cosmopolitan" writes Leigh Eric Schmidt, using some of the many phrases he employs to describe these alternative traditions, "is an artifact of religious liberalism" and yet, as liberal religious leaders and institutions suffered diminished cultural influence, the forms of spirituality spawned by religious liberalism continued to thrive.[9] From American giants like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, a lineage passed through William James and Ralph Waldo Trine at the turn of the century down to twentieth-century figures like Rufus Jones, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Howard Thurman. As liberal Protestants cast about for language adequate to speak to their fragmenting base, they frequently turned to precisely these writers as guides, and so the literature of popular religion in the twentieth

[8] See Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005); Eugene Taylor, *Shadow Culture: Psychology and Spirituality in America* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1999); Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Charles Taylor's magisterial *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) provides a highly useful intellectual history of the modern notion of "inwardness" so critical to the development of the kinds of spirituality these others describe. Charles Taylor shares with Schmidt, Taylor, and Fuller an appreciation for these modern forms of the self so often derided by critics as mere narcissism. Also highly insightful by way of comparison is Jackson Lears's *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), in which Lears argues at length for the persistence of cultural traditions—in short, magic—that counter the hegemonies of Cartesian dualism and the Protestant Ethic.

[9] Schmidt, *Restless Soul*, 6-7.

century is littered with borrowings from these previous generations of transcendental and pragmatist thinkers. What attracted the new generation of writers to these predecessors was the notion, articulated most clearly by Emerson and James, that "religion was the universal search for meaning, and its archetype was the individual seeker." Accordingly, notes Schmidt, "religion . . . could be saved only if it became spirituality," and so the story of popular religious books from the 1920s onward is, in addition to one of liberal Protestant decline, also a tale of particular forms of spirituality in the making.[10] Historians of religion in America, themselves often personally committed to institutional Protestantism, have too often simply failed to see the continuing and growing vitality of this "shadow culture" or "invisible religion" through the course of the twentieth century.[11] The pluralist turn of American religious print culture by the 1940s both depended on and enhanced the importance of these alternative spiritualities.

The study of religious middlebrow culture in the twentieth century, then, reveals not only the decline of the cultural power of the liberal Protestant establishment, but also this second tale, the continuing rise of alternative spiritualities. Liberal Protestant elites may have failed in seeking a spiritual center for the culture as a whole, but millions of individual readers nevertheless turned to these books in their own seeking, looking for a center for their own lives. From the alternative spiritual traditions that Schmidt and

[10] Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 228.

[11] The terms come from Taylor, *Shadow Culture*, and Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Times* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). Though by no means synonymous—Taylor is describing a particular cultural formation, while Luckmann theorizes more abstractly about the nature of religion and the individual in modernity—each of the terms does point to the hiddenness of extra-institutional religion in most scholarship and cultural criticism, at least through the late 1990s.

others describe, writers like Rufus Jones, Emmet Fox, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Joshua Loth Liebman, and Norman Vincent Peale borrowed a language they hoped would continue to speak to vast numbers of Americans. Here they were right, and in their borrowing they brought into the American religious mainstream new spiritual vocabularies inflected with the accents of mysticism, mind cure, and psychology, all three witnessing a period of great ferment around 1900. Under the rubric of "experience"—whether natural or supernatural, whether gathered through the five sense of the body or the ineffable perceptions of the soul—these idioms claimed to speak of the universal in religion. Universal claims of any sort receive nothing but scorn from academic critics so finely attuned to human difference, especially differences of power based in race, class, and gender.[12] But universal claims held great appeal in the mid-twentieth century for elites still hoping to speak for the nation as a whole, and for religious seekers looking for truth beyond the confines of orthodoxy. A spirituality infused with psychology, with mysticism, and with mind cure helped sell millions of books to readers seeking their own centers.

Any discussion of the rise and fall of religious systems, and of the relationship of religious institutions to individuals, inevitably leads directly to the problem of secularization. Much of religious publishing in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, in fact, must be understood as a cultural response to secularization, as Protestant elites searched for

[12] One of the hallmarks of "midcult," according to Dwight Macdonald, was its claim to speak universally, rather than to embody the particularities of individual person, place, and moment that Macdonald thought characterized great art. Dwight Macdonald, "Masscult and Midcult," in *Against the American Grain: Essays on the Effects of Mass Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 3-75.

ways to speak to a culture now loosed from their grip. My approach to the process of secularization builds most directly on the work of sociologist Christian Smith, who conceives of secularization as a "revolution" rather than as the inevitable outcome of modernization, and therefore as the accomplishment of specific human actors, not the telos of grand historical processes. Secularization, in his words, was "the outcome of a struggle between contending groups with conflicting interests seeking to control social knowledge and institutions."[13] Smith's focus on contingency, agency, interests, power, and conflict opens a vast array of historical developments for inquiry. Secularization thus conceived demands nuanced attention both to the vulnerabilities of the dominant religious culture in the period of its decline, specifically liberal Protestantism in the United States from the 1870s through the 1920s, and the motivations, resources, and grievances of the secular insurgents. The hackneyed notion that Western religion contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction is inadequate to explain secularization in America, yet the study of religious publishing in the decades after World War I reveals, again in Smith's words, that "religious actors played key roles in the marginalization of religion in American public life, liberal Protestants in particular."[14] The story of mass-market religious books in the early and mid-twentieth century is an ironic tale of overt resistance and unwitting complicity in the transformation of American religious culture from

[13] Christian Smith, "Introduction," in Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), vii.
[14] Christian Smith, *Secular Revolution*, 20.

Protestant dominance, in spite of significant and important minority traditions, to a much more open, democratic, even chaotic, spiritual marketplace.

Secularization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries occurred most obviously at the institutional level, as many universities and publishing houses, for example, separated themselves from their religious roots. Understanding secularization on the level of the individual consciousness is a much trickier problem, one that the study of inspirational literature can help solve.[15] Christian Smith maintains, "The secular revolution transformed the basic cultural understanding of the human self and its care, displacing the established spiritually and morally framed Protestant conception of the 'care of souls' (over which the church and its agencies held jurisdiction), and establishing instead a naturalistic, psychologized model of human personhood (over which therapists and psychologists are the authorities)."[16] Historians such as Jackson Lears and Christopher Lasch, sociologists such as Robert Bellah and Philip Rieff, and numerous other social critics have described, documented, and generally lamented the rise of a therapeutic culture in the twentieth century, which is typically connected to the ascendancy of pervasive consumerism and the decline of Protestant understandings of the self.[17] Therapeutic culture, these critics contend, aimed for the adjustment of the

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[15] Peter Berger, in *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Co., 1969), though dated now by its appearance before the global resurgence of fundamentalism in the late twentieth century, offers what remains nevertheless a compelling account of secularization and of the possibilities for faith in a modern society.

[16] Christian Smith, *Secular Revolution*, 3.

[17] Lears, *Fables of Abundance*; Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978); Robert Bellah, et al.,

individual to social structures as given, to the status quo, and thus made no allowance and provided no resources for penetrating social critique. The great inspirational bestsellers of the mid-twentieth century, then, especially those with psychological or positive-thinking orientations, seem prime evidence of just this sort of religious decline, and the kind of spirituality represented in these texts, according to the critics, represents a secular religion, the final stage of the modernization of soul care, and the ultimate victory of therapeutic consumerism over redemptive religion.

Such criticism contains many useful insights—therapeutic culture often has led to political quiescence and consumerist hedonism. Yet, ultimately, my examination of the literature of soul care in the mid-twentieth century reveals a process of transformation rather than secularization in the realm of private spirituality. Granted, many Americans' understanding of the human self did indeed grow increasingly psychological in the first half of the twentieth century; in this study I aim to extend our understanding of just how this happened. But our framework must recognize the slippage between structures of domination—the ethos of personal efficiency, say, which Jackson Lears locates at the center of the therapeutic culture of managerial capitalism—and particular human responses to dominant cultures.[18] In the arena of lived religion, according to Robert Orsi, possibilities for openness, innovation, and resistance exist within structures of power.

Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

[18] In this regard, the Gramscian model of cultural hegemony proves useful, since Gramsci noted that hegemonic structures must continually be reinscribed to maintain their givenness.

Orsi sees lived religion as a site of resistance *and* domination, of autonomy *and* hegemony. In his description of the transgressive possibility of lived religion, "[t]he sacred is reconceptualized as the place not simply where things happen, but where the circulations of power short-circuit," and yet, recognizing that religion as practiced so often defies simple either/ors, he calls for a simultaneous exploration of "the ways that religious idioms . . . are themselves deeply, subtly, but inevitably implicated in strategies of social and psychological discipline."[19]

I apply "lived religion" scholarship to print culture, studying consumption alongside production, reception with distribution, readers and texts. To understand the place of books and reading in the narratives of this project—the arc of Protestant cultural hegemony; the rise of a therapeutic ethos; the emergence from the shadows of alternative spiritualities and psychologies; and the pervasive influence of mass culture and consumerism on spiritual and religious practices—we must leaven our investigations of texts, authors, and the apparatus of production with the yeast of consumption and reception, and in particular with a careful look at readers and practices of reading. The social history of religious reading, in fact, naturally aligns with Orsi's articulation of lived religion, since as David D. Hall states, "it is a truism of the new reading history that readers remake the text."[20] Literary scholars for a quarter century now have theorized extensively about reader response, beginning first as a reaction against New Criticism in

[19] Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 15.
[20] David D. Hall, "Readers and Reading in America: Historical and Critical Perspectives," in David D. Hall, ed., *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 184.

literary studies and recently broadening into a vibrant field of study in the history of the book and print culture—what Hall terms "the new reading history."[21] The methods of "new reading history" provide a critical framework for my exploration of the ways the book business shaped spirituality in the decades after World War I.

These important developments in print culture studies, especially their implications for our understanding of lived religious practices, allow this project to move beyond earlier studies of inspirational literature in the early and mid-twentieth century in a number of critical ways. Sociologists Louis Schneider and Sanford M. Dornbusch's *Popular Religion: Inspirational Books in America* and historian Donald Meyer's *The Positive Thinkers* made great contributions to our understanding of the cultural and intellectual history of these texts, but neither of these studies located the books in question in the context of the larger print culture, and therefore did not attend to marketing, distribution, or reception.[22] The framework of religious middlebrow culture provides a bridge between these earlier studies and current work in the history of reading and the book.

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[21] See Jane Tompkins, ed., *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Cathy N. Davidson, *Reading in America: Literature and Social History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles, eds., *Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); David D. Hall, ed., *Cultures of Print*; and Barbara Ryan and Amy M. Thomas, eds., *Reading Acts: U.S. Readers' Interactions with Literature, 1800-1950* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002). The most influential monograph in this new field of print culture and reception studies has been Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

[22] Louis Schneider and Sanford M. Dornbusch, *Popular Religion: Inspirational Books in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: Religion as Pop Psychology from Mary Baker Eddy to Oral Roberts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

Attention to middlebrow culture makes evident both the centrality of reading in American religious life in this period, and the complex negotiation between cultural authority and reader autonomy as readers turned to experts for spiritual guidance while simultaneously struggling against narrow orthodoxies.

Religious middlebrow culture structured both the relationship of readers to texts and the expectations readers had for the transformative power of reading. As modern life challenged previously held assumptions about faith, character, personality, and the self, readers turned to inspirational literature for guidance, and the rules of middlebrow culture shaped the meanings readers made in those encounters. But religious middlebrow culture also shaped spirituality by introducing previously marginal ideas about the nature of religious experience into the mainstream of popular thought, and by preparing readers for a spiritual engagement with religious "others." The process of secularization forced liberal Protestants in particular to search for new tools, tools adequate to the task of shepherding readers across the shifting terrain of the self in a consumer culture. Middlebrow reading habits in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s became a central part of religious practice for millions of Americans; the content of the books they read shaped middle-class spirituality for the remainder of the twentieth century.

Prologue: From Evangelical to Liberal Religious Print Culture

When Rufus Jones remarked that the proper way to read was "pencil in hand . . . to go back again and again to a good book, to reread marked passages" he presented modern Americans with old advice about how to read. Nineteenth-century evangelicals had spent considerable energy trying to persuade Americans to read in just these ways. In fact, Jones's essay from 1921, written to promote the first Religious Book Week, encapsulated quite neatly the tension between modern and earlier, evangelical ideologies of the book, the tension at the heart of the religious book business in the 1920s. The religious leaders and bookmen who championed Religious Book Week sought to use the tools of modern business to advocate for an older culture of the book; this older book culture, they hoped, might help counter the corrosive influences of the very consumer culture they now tentatively embraced. In order to grasp the significance of these innovations, however, we must first briefly look back at the book culture of the previous century. Nineteenth-century evangelicals passionately proclaimed the power of print to shape lives of faith, and worked tirelessly to write, produce, and distribute books, and to educate American readers about how to read those books. In the process, they not only built the first American mass media enterprises, but also established an ideology of reading religiously that continued to exert great influence well into the twentieth century, as the example of Rufus Jones indicates.

This apparent continuity in reading ideology belies profound underlying changes, however, for much more than business practices had changed by the 1920s. The print culture of the nineteenth century arose in a religious context defined powerfully by

evangelicalism. Rufus Jones, his fellow clergymen who supported the Religious Book Week, and the New York bookmen who devised such modern methods of selling books were religious liberals, modernists separated from their evangelical forbears by a great chasm. This divide arose from the insights of evolutionary science and historical Biblical criticism, but also, just as importantly, from new thinking about the nature of religious experience itself, thinking that stemmed from the distinctively modern discourses of psychology, mysticism, and mind cure. The transformative power of the 1920s innovations in bookselling came from the confluence of modern business practices, these modern religious ideas, and nineteenth-century evangelical zeal for print. The twentieth-century moderns shared with their evangelical predecessors a wholehearted affirmation of the power and danger of print, which fostered both a missionary fervor for books and a determination to shape what and how to read, but they inhabited a world of remarkably different religious sensibilities. Before we begin our tale in the 1920s, we must first investigate the print culture of nineteenth-century evangelicalism and the rise of liberal religious alternatives at the turn of the twentieth century.

EVANGELICALISM, PUBLISHING, AND IDEOLOGIES OF READING IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Print mass media in the United States arose as an evangelical endeavor in the early years of the nineteenth century.[1] The millennial dream of building God's kingdom

[1] My account of religious reading and publishing in the nineteenth century relies heavily on the work of two scholars, David Paul Nord and Candy Gunther Brown, who have produced the seminal works in the field: Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the*

in the new nation inspired the post-Revolutionary generation of publishing pioneers to embark on the audacious enterprise of bringing the sacred word to every American; the rapid pace of change in this emerging society made such previously outlandish dreams plausible. The economy in the early national period grew at a tremendous rate as the so-called "market revolution" transformed business relations, while the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening provided both great zeal and a new, post-Calvinist hope for individual and social reform.[2] A third development, the invention of faster and cheaper printing technologies, contributed the final leg to the edifice of religious publishing in the early national period. In short order, evangelical reformers founded the American Bible Society (1816), the American Sunday School Union (1824), and the American Tract Society (1825).[3] In doing so, argues historian David Paul Nord, "the evangelical publishers had become leading innovators of printing technology and national business organization" and "led America into the modern era of mass publication and systematic distribution of printed material."[4]

Birth of Mass Media in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[2] See, for example, Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1827* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); and Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[3] In addition to Nord and Brown, see Peter J. Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[4] Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 6, 5.

The output of books grew rapidly, increasing 500 percent from 1825 to 1850, as the market shifted from a majority of British products to a majority American.[5] Isaac Adams' flatbed steam press and new techniques for papermaking, which came into widespread use in the 1830s, combined with the spread of the railroads, improvements in domestic lighting, and the greater availability of eyeglasses to make reading and reading materials increasingly accessible to the American people.[6] As these changes took hold, writes historian Candy Gunter Brown, "Evangelicals became increasingly optimistic that the Holy Spirit could reveal the pure Word through a wide range of linguistic styles, genres, and forms."[7] All along, evangelical publishers faced the challenge of how to engage the world without being corrupted by it, to be "*in* the market but not *of* it."[8] By mid-century, however, "evangelicals became progressively more comfortable with blending religious and commercial agendas" so long as the essential message of the texts remained true to evangelical doctrine.[9] Though still leery of blurring the sacred and the profane, evangelical publishers became increasingly open by the 1860s to using secular culture for spiritual purposes. As a result, the book business became an ever-more potent force in American religious life.

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[5] Brown, *Word in the World*, 47, 48.
[6] For a thorough account of these advances in the technologies of printing and reading, and the implications for American cultural history, see Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). See also Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Everyday Ideas: Socioliterary Experience among Antebellum New Englanders* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2006).
[7] Brown, *Word in the World*, 4.
[8] Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 62.
[9] Brown, *Word in the World*, 161.

Nineteenth-century print culture shared with the Protestantism that spurred it a democratizing impulse, an impulse rooted in the ideology of the priesthood of all believers. This impulse led, in the vastly expanded world of print, to what one might call a priesthood of all readers, a situation ripe for religious turmoil rooted in interpretive chaos. Beginning in the highly literate society of colonial New England, tensions between clerical authority and lay readers characterized much of American religious life. According to David D. Hall, "books—and how the act of reading them was represented—were means by which the ministers imposed themselves on ordinary people," while, at the same time, books "proved useful to those laymen who disagreed with what the ministers were saying. Unsettled from within by their very own tradition, the domination of the clergy was resisted by the printers and booksellers who ran the marketplace for books."[10] The reading practices of early New England differed greatly from European norms, and established patterns of conflict over reading between clergy and laity that persisted throughout the colonial and early national periods, and survived into the twentieth century.

Whether reading enhanced or undermined the authority of the clergy, it remained, in the lives of readers, a communal experience. Just as Protestant individualism never led to the widespread social anarchy some feared, because individual religious experience was nearly always mediated through local congregations, so too the experience of reading was shaped by social structures, including reviews, advertisements,

[10] David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 19.

sermons, and book-talk with friends and family. The profusion of print material in the nineteenth century, in fact, engendered what Brown calls a "textually-defined community" that operated both in concert with, and at times at cross-purposes with, local congregations. "The practices of an evangelical textual community," Brown notes, "linked individual experiences with social processes."[11] Participation in this community of readers allowed even isolated individuals a sense of belonging to the greater evangelical endeavor.

Unlike the community defined by the local church, however, which took place under the watchful gaze of the male clergy, the meaning making of the textual community occurred in the home, a sphere of feminine influence. "Religious publications," Brown writes, "coupled a narrowing inward of communal identity toward a domestic center with a broadening outward to intensify individuals' sense of membership in the church universal."[12] The vast amount of evangelical print material created new communities of faith, communities defined by texts, and these new communities connected readers to a national, even global, faith tradition and, at the same time, enhanced the influence of women in the home, where actual reading typically occurred. The tension of clerical and lay authority that had always characterized

[11] Brown, *Word in the World*, 10.
[12] Brown, *Word in the World*, 13.

Protestantism was further compounded in the mid-nineteenth century, therefore, by increased gender polarization.[13]

Religious books functioned culturally amid these complex dynamics of authority and autonomy, in a marketplace laden with promise and danger. "On the one hand," Nord maintains, "the leaders of the Bible and tract movements were utterly exhilarated by the possibilities of the commercial culture" since the market afforded the greatest possibility in history for mass evangelism.[14] "On the other hand, they viewed the market as their most wily and dangerous foe. In the religious free market, heresy and infidelity were thriving, while the traditional authority of the standing-order churches was fading."[15] The tract societies and colporteurs bringing reading material to the nation had great reason to fear, since, according to their implicit theory of print communication, "reading . . . was a very dangerous activity."[16] So dangerous, in fact, were books that evangelical writers in this age of the temperance crusades often "compared the power of reading to the intoxicating, addictive power of alcohol." Some even more succinctly "believed that books could kill" since they offered unregulated and unsupervised access to a whole universe of ideas, including the sinful and demonic.[17] In much the same way that religious conservatives in the twentieth century stepped, at first warily, and later with gusto, into religious broadcasting, their forbears in the nineteenth century "proposed to

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[13] Brown, *Word in the World*, 33. The standard account of gender tension in nineteenth-century evangelicalism is Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977).
[14] Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 6.
[15] Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 7.
[16] Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 118.
[17] Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 115.

meet the enemy on his own ground, on his own terms, with his own weapons."[18] But unlike religious broadcasters a century later, the producers of print recognized that publishing good books and getting them into the hands of readers was not enough.

Rather, religious publishers throughout the nineteenth century sought to overcome the possible dangers of reading by teaching their readers how to read properly. More than anything, they taught, "religious reading was difficult[;] . . . it required skill, exertion, and patience."[19] Reading was to be done intensively, not extensively, focusing on a few, carefully chosen texts, with the understanding that "strategies such as prayer, memorization, and meditation . . . defined reading as a sacred activity."[20] Tract writer John James advised his readers to "read alone, in deep seriousness, with earnest prayer; read slowly, meditate, digest, reflect."[21] The frequent gustatory metaphors—to chew, digest, or ruminate upon a text, and savor its flavors—used to describe proper religious reading recall the *lectio divina* of Christian monasticism, dating at least to the Rule of St. Benedict in the sixth century, which called for scared reading at the common table.[22] Hall, moreover, remarks that advice on proper ways of reading religiously, dating from the early Middle Ages, often compared reading to the practice of meditation; John James

[18] Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 119.
[19] Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 123.
[20] Brown, *Word in the World*, 118.
[21] Quoted in Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 124.
[22] For a contrary perspective on the digestive metaphors so common in reading studies, see Janice Radway, "Reading Is Not Eating: Mass-Produced Literature and the Theoretical, Methodological, and Political Consequences of a Metaphor," *Book Research Quarterly* 2 (Fall 1986): 7-29.

in the nineteenth laid out the stakes in plain terms: "Salvation depends on knowledge, and knowledge on meditation."[23]

Nineteenth-century evangelicals recognized reading as a religious practice fraught with such great potential for good or ill that an important genre of reading guides proliferated.[24] Noah Porter, the president of Yale College, opened his widely reprinted 1870 reading guide, *Books and Reading: Or, What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?*, with an extended image of a "savage" brought to London. Of all the wonders of civilization, including museums, cathedrals, and factories, Porter mused, books would prove the most mysterious and incomprehensible to this imagined visitor. The thought-experiment of the "savage" in London demonstrated to Porter that books contained the essential power of Christian civilization itself; he imagined an Englishman telling this captive, "in this little book which gives an account of the discovery of your country by the white man, will be found the sufficient reason why his majesty, our king, has a right to burn your towns, to shoot down your people, to take possession of your land and bring you hither as a captive. . . ."[25] The power of the printed word, in fact—not just as a tool of Christian dominion in the world, but also as an instrument of spiritual influence in the human heart—stood above all others. "No force nor influence can undo the work begun by those few pages," Porter exhorted. "[N]o love of father or mother, no temptation of

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[23] David D. Hall, "Readers and Reading in America: Historical and Critical Perspectives," in David D. Hall, ed., *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 178.

[24] Candy Gunther Brown's *The World in the World* led me to the following examples of evangelical reading guides.

[25] Noah Porter, *Books and Reading; Or, What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?* (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1870), 3-4.

money or honor, no fear of suffering or disgrace, is an overmatch for the enchantment conjured up and sustained by [an] exciting volume." The right book might awake in a young reader "holy aspirations, which, all his life after, burn on . . . in a kindly love to God and man," while the wrong book "makes him a hater of his fellow-man and a blasphemer of his God."[26] Therefore, Porter continued, "we ought to select our books—above all our favorite books—with a more jealous care than we choose our friends and intimates" and read those books in the prayerful and attentive manner befitting their sacred power.[27]

George Philip Philes, author of another reading guide, echoed Porter's exhortations, and added, more practically, that each worthwhile book should be read four times, in order "to master and use it; not only to swallow it, but to make it part of ourselves, and thereby strengthen all our powers."[28] When read in such a way—seriously, devoutly, and intensely—in the way prescribed in the medieval period, in colonial New England, by antebellum evangelicals, and by Noah Porter, George Philip Philes, and Rufus Jones—the meaning of a text would lay bare for the reader, and the printed word would touch a human soul as a means of divine grace. This idea, so foreign to modern theorists of reading, rested, writes Nord, on "the belief that the meaning of a text resides entirely in the text and that the text is hegemonic."[29] Prayerful reading would

[26] Porter, *Books and Reading*, 4.
[27] Porter, *Books and Reading*, 8.
[28] George Philip Philes, *How to Read a Book in the Best Way*, (New York: G.P. Philes, 1873), 21.
[29] Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 133.

eliminate the anarchic possibilities inherent in both Protestant doctrine and the emerging mass media, and allow the reader direct access to sacred, timeless truths.

Evangelicals such as Porter and Philes believed the modes of sacred reading they cherished were losing ground to what they called "shallow" or "passive" reading. This debate persisted throughout the twentieth century in various guises, secular and religious, as critics came to see the "shallow" reading that so vexed nineteenth-century jeremiahs as but one facet of the myriad vices of American consumer culture.[30] Philosopher Paul Griffiths, for example, contrasts religious reading—"as a lover reads, with a tensile attentiveness that wishes to linger, to prolong, to savor"—with consumer reading, which "wants to extract what is useful or exciting or entertaining from what is read, preferably with dispatch . . . all in the quick orgasm of consumption."[31] Just as nineteenth-century tract writers believed a good religious text to be "hegemonic," its meaning plain to any

[30] Forms of this debate arise in numerous guises, including as one aspect of the argument over "great books" in higher education advanced by critics such as Allan Bloom in *Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). See also Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), and Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). The most clearly articulated contemporary defense of religious reading comes from the Roman Catholic philosopher Paul J. Griffiths in *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Griffiths proposes a discursive definition of religion, taking religion to be a particular kind of account of the way things are. Griffiths's religion as account resembles in many respects Richard Rorty's notion of "final vocabulary." See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Reading, to Griffiths, is basic to the process of developing and maintaining a religious account. In his words, "Religious reading, like any other kind of reading, is done with a purpose: the acquisition or development of the skills and information necessary for offering a religious account" (Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, 40). The fierceness with which he defends reading religiously mirrors the polemics of a secular critic like Edmundson; each takes reading to be the central activity in human becoming.

[31] Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, ix.

attentive reader, Griffiths asserts, "the basic metaphors [of reading religiously] are those of discovery, uncovering, retrieval, opening up: religious readers read what is there to be read, and what is there to be read always precedes, exceeds, and in the end supersedes its readers."[32] In contrast, Griffiths contends, stand most modern ways of reading. "Consumerist readers who have the courage of their convictions," he claims, "understand themselves to be writers as well as readers; religious readers who know what they are doing do not."[33] This stark divide between religious and consumerist modes of reading, and the intense seriousness with which the argument was engaged, reveals an abiding conviction throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the power of the printed word to mold character and faith, for good or ill.

The irony at the heart of this great reading debate, as the pioneers of religious mass media clearly recognized, is that religious reading in the nineteenth century depended on the market, and by the twentieth century, not just the market but the culture of consumerism itself. For Griffiths, "the work read . . . can never be discarded because it cannot be exhausted," yet by the mid-twentieth century especially, books had became cheap and disposable commodities. Rufus Jones even contended in 1921 that to read religiously one *must* enter the marketplace, one must buy. Sharing books, reading aloud—none of these traditional modes of relating to sacred texts would suffice. Religion, of course, as one part of larger cultural systems, only exists as embedded in a web of cultural norms, beliefs, and practices. As R. Laurence Moore and others have

[32] Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, 41.
[33] Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, 44.

demonstrated, in America this means religion *happens* in a consumer marketplace.[34] Though many have feared the dire consequences of American consumerism and mass-production for proper religious practice, Americans of all traditions of faith in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries lived their religious lives in a culture profoundly shaped by the dictates of the market.[35] Paul Gutjahr observes that in American practice by the early twentieth century, even Bibles, once "simply a religious guidebook for life . . . had become collectable commodities."[36]

The prescriptions of clergy, educators, and publishers reveal a great deal about the social and cultural anxieties engendered by the rise of a mass print media, but to appreciate fully the stakes in these debates about religious and consumerist reading practices, we must look at how readers actually read in the nineteenth century, and what kind of religious meanings they derived from texts.[37] Though deciphering just what

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[34] Moore, *Selling God.*

[35] For two excellent analyses of these same concerns over religion, consumer culture, and mass production, but in the realm of visual rather than print culture, see David Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Sally M. Promey, "Interchangeable Art: Warner Sallman and the Critics of Mass Culture," in David Morgan, ed., *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

[36] Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 175.

[37] David D. Hall has articulated some of the most helpful methods for approaching the very difficult task of assessing what kind of meaning readers might have derived from texts. Hall helpfully suggests that scholars carefully comb texts for "reading as 'represented' in texts"—suggestions, in other words, that authors provided directly to readers about how to read their works—and augment these insights with primary evidence, from diaries or letters, for example, of how readers actually read, bearing in mind always that readers' accounts of reading "need to be understood in light of the rules . . . that inhere in genres. Otherwise, we may grant readers a misleading autonomy and particularity" [Hall, "Readers and Reading in America," 180, footnote 36]. Ways of

readers made of the texts they read is notoriously difficult, the available evidence indicates that religious readers often proceeded quite pragmatically, and embraced a wide range of practices and texts. Recent research, for example, reveals a hodge-podge of ways early nineteenth-century readers related to religious tracts and Bibles: many were simply indifferent, while others read with the solitary fervor and intensity the evangelists hoped for; some treated religious books, especially Bibles, as totems, deriving religious meaning from the book as object even if they were illiterate; occasionally readers read communally, either aloud in a group or through extensive sharing of texts; while still others, according to colporteur accounts, blended styles of reading in unexpected ways. Colporteurs, suspicious like all who promoted religious books of "shallow" reading, became fascinated, after surprising encounters with actual readers, "by the power of cursory reading, for good as well as evil."[38] Indeed, while Griffiths argues with certainty that "religious reading is a good and that consumerist reading is not only indifferent to religion, but actively hostile to it," antebellum colporteurs were struck to find "people who picked up [a tract] for a quick glance, just to pass the time—and were gripped, arrested, convicted, and converted."[39]

Nineteenth-century evangelical readers, in fact, derived religious meaning not just from a wider array of reading practices than expected, but also from a wider array of texts. Though many chose conventional evangelical texts, others turned to "texts from

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readings, in other words, are often so natural that readers may be unable to express their relationship to these rules.

[38] Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 148.

[39] Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, x; Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 148.

sources as diverse as Catholicism, Unitarianism, and secular belles lettres for evangelical purposes."[40] The pragmatic flexibility readers showed in both their practices and their reading choices reveals that the arbiters of religious print culture were unable to contain the print media, the mass cultural enterprise they had been so instrumental in creating. Readers of religious texts freely selected "among alternatives, moving between older and newer genres . . . intensive and extensive reading styles, and evangelical and non-evangelical textual communities."[41] Of most significance for our story, by the end of the nineteenth century the free marketplace of print brought more than just Catholicism and Unitarianism to spiritually seeking readers; increasingly, readers encountered alternative spiritualities that would change the face religious publishing and middle-class religious life in the twentieth century.

AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM AND THE INVENTION OF MYSTICISM, MIND CURE, AND PSYCHOLOGY

For all the fulmination of self-proclaimed reading arbiters, readers took the notion of a priesthood of all readers to its logical conclusions. While many continued to adhere to evangelical doctrine and reading advice, flexible and pragmatic approaches to reading created opportunities for engagement with a wider array of ideas about the self and the divine. New textual communities emerged that sometimes enhanced clerical or denominational authority, but that, just as likely, might also work against those structures of power. New reading practices and the expanding marketplace of print bolstered the

[40] Brown, *Word in the World*, 117.
[41] Brown, *Word in the World*, 117.

spiritual influence of home life and women in particular. These critical developments led to dramatic changes in the spiritual lives of many Americans at the turn of the twentieth century.

In the late nineteenth century, Darwinism and historical Biblical criticism came to challenge traditional evangelical doctrine, and new ways of thinking about the self and religious experiences emerged. The discourses of mysticism, mind cure, and psychology, discourses that proved so critical to the literature of soul care in the twentieth century, spread as significant components of popular religion in large part through the mass print media. Rather than religious movements dependent on revivalism or church life, these were discourses, creatures of the printed word.[42] The mass media unleashed by nineteenth-century evangelicalism enabled the alternative spiritualities of the twentieth century to flourish, especially with the rise of religious middlebrow culture in the decades after World War I.

Mysticism, mind cure, and psychology each arose in the cultural milieu of nineteenth-century Anglo-American liberal Protestantism, and each reached a period of particular ferment in the years around 1900. The economic, cultural, and social developments historians describe using the rubric "modernity"—positivistic science, corporate and government bureaucracies, the research university, Darwinism, historical-

[42] I do not mean to suggest here that mysticism, mind cure, and psychology were solely creatures of print. Mind cure in particular was an embodied practice as well as a discourse or system of thought. Bodily healing, after all, was a critical appeal of mind cure. But an alternate name for the movement, New Thought, reveals as well the centrality of philosophical insight to mind cure, and all three, mysticism, mind cure, and psychology, were much more dependent on the print marketplace for their success than traditional forms of Protestant or Roman Catholic Christianity.

critical study of the Bible, consumerism, urbanization—all contributed to a sense of crisis in liberal Protestantism in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Out of their own responses to these crises, liberals at the elite and popular levels fashioned the discourses of mysticism, mind cure, and psychology, discourses that, in fact, only slowly over the course of the twentieth century emerged from their common origins as distinct modes of language, thought, and practice.

When writers in subsequent decades searched for vocabularies of faith capacious enough to capture the struggle of modern Americans for spiritual wholeness in a fragmenting culture, they often turned to these new ways of speaking and thinking about the self and the divine. In spite of critical differences, the appeal of each was the same: all three claimed access to universal truth, and all three built universal claims on the foundation of individual experience. The paradoxical fusion of the universal and the individual provided the tools liberal religious intellectuals sought to reconstitute whole selves torn apart by modernity. Scholars looking back from a hundred years later see such universal claims as illusory at best, and more often as dangerous attempts to mask structures of domination rooted in race, gender, and nation; the popular books of the period are dismissed as nothing more than the "success literature of modern consumer capitalism."[43] But we must understand the historical circumstances that characterized the invention of mysticism, mind cure, and psychology if we are to make sense of the appropriation of these discourses by later popularizers. As Leigh Schmidt notes, "it was

[43] An assessment of late-twentieth-century criticism, as characterized by Beryl Satter in *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 7.

exactly the sui generis rhetoric that made 'mysticism' timely, not timeless."[44] Claims to universality, in other words, were very much of the moment, and mysticism, mind cure, and psychology, by offering universal truths rooted in individual experience, seemed to offer insight into the essence of the human condition. William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, first published in 1902, stands at the apex of these efforts by religious liberals to achieve a universal synthesis. Not surprisingly, it more than any other text laid the foundation for the inspirational literature of the twentieth century.

Of the three, mysticism as a category of experience had the deepest roots in Western religious life, and the longest relationship with liberalism. Though the terms "mystic" and "mystical" are ancient in origin, the term "mysticism" in English dates only to the mid-eighteenth century, as a term used by Anglicans to critique the ecstatic "excesses" of sects such as Methodists and Quakers. Not until the 1840s and 1850s, in the hands of British and American Romantics and Transcendentalists, according to Schmidt, did the term begin to acquire modern meanings. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and others, Schmidt writes, refashioned mysticism from a term of sectarian critique into something "loosely spiritual, intuitive, emancipatory, and universal."[45] The notion of mysticism as the solitary soul's union with the divine, an experience at once ineffable and timeless, not bound by culture, language, history, or

[44] Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism'," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (June 2003): 289.
[45] Schmidt, "Making of Modern 'Mysticism'," 286.

even self, was an invention of nineteenth-century liberalism, as was the notion that such mystical experiences served as "the fountainhead of all genuine spirituality."[46]

A host of American and British writers in the years around 1900 seized on the new discourse of mysticism to advance the cause of liberal Protestantism. Jackson Lears locates the vogue in mysticism at this time within a broad context of antimodernism, and certainly the fascination of many turn-of-the-century scholars of mysticism with the Orient and with medieval Catholic spirituality supports such an assertion.[47] What the embodied ecstasies of Pentecostalism offered to the poor at Asuza Street in Los Angeles in 1906, mysticism provided for elite liberals: pure experience of the divine. Critics note that the mysticism vogue in these years was mostly second-order—it was a vogue in mysticism studies more than in mystical practice—yet this simply confirms that these were thoroughgoing moderns seeking refuge in a spiritual zone safe from the disenchantment of modernity. In addition to James's *Varieties*, the years around and after 1900 witnessed the Anglican William Ralph Inge's *Christian Mysticism* (1899); *The Mystical Element of Religion* (1908), a study of medieval Italian saints by the Baron Friedrich von Hügel, a British Roman Catholic; the American Quaker Rufus Jones's *Studies in Mystical Religion* (1909); *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1911), and *Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People* (1914) by the Anglican Evelyn Underhill, a student of von Hügel; Methodist John Wright Buckham's *Mysticism and Modern Life* (1915); and the German Lutheran Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1917).

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[46] Schmidt, "Making of Modern 'Mysticism'," 281.

[47] T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983): 142-181.

From outside this wide array of Western Christian traditions, the German-American editor Paul Carus introduced many Americans to Buddhist mystical practice through his own writings and his translations of D.T. Suzuki; Carus's work was but one small part of a larger vogue in Eastern traditions that included the Vedanta of Swami Vivekenanda and Madame H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy. Even this cursory review of mystical writings reveals the deep hunger for authentic experience of the divine among Protestant moderns at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Evelyn Underhill began to abandon the term "mysticism" by the 1920s and replace it with "spirituality." Indeed, the discourse on mysticism and mystical practice, born among liberal Protestants in the mid-nineteenth century, has continued unabated into the twenty-first century under the rubric of spirituality. To understand how mysticism went from an object of study by liberal Protestant intellectuals a century ago to the governing paradigm of much of American religious life today requires an examination of the concept's entry into popular discourse through the mid-century culture of religious middlebrow reading.

Mysticism helped liberals at the turn of the twentieth century cope with science, especially with the positivistic conceptions of human nature most starkly represented by evolutionary biology and laboratory psychology. Many of the early scholars of mysticism, in fact, including Rufus Jones, John Wright Buckham, James Bissett Pratt, and William James, were also students of psychological science. But before we turn to the emergence of academic psychology, we must attend to its sister "science," the popular religious ideology of mind cure. Like mysticism and, indeed, like psychology itself, mind cure was

an artifact of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism. Mind-cure shared with mysticism the use of altered states of consciousness (often hypnosis) and union of the self with the larger cosmos, what Emerson called the "Over-Soul" and later writers "More," "Supreme Mind," and "Universal Consciousness." In offering escape from the limitations of self, Lears comments, "Both mind cure and the mystical wave seemed genuine liberations."[48] The intense popular interest in metaphysical healing between 1885 and 1910 paralleled the scholarly focus on mysticism in these same years. And the ideology of mind cure proved a powerful allure for writers and readers throughout the twentieth century. Though mind cure, indeed, frequently succumbed to the temptation of the easy answer—William Leach perhaps not inaccurately describes it as "wish-oriented, optimistic, sunny, the epitome of cheer and self-confidence, and completely lacking in anything resembling the tragic view of life"—mind cure nevertheless met real needs of modern Americans.[49] Indeed, mind-cure philosophies have remained into the twenty-first century as the inevitable companion of liberal religious efforts to forge spiritual practices that engage the problems of everyday life in modern terms.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, mind cure, like psychology and unlike mysticism, offered adherents a therapeutic, scientific system of belief. Rather than an antimodern retreat, then, mind cure promised to harness modernity's advances for the enrichment of human life. The language of mind cure ran thick with industrial-age metaphors, especially metaphors of electricity and harnessed energy. Phineas P. Quimby,

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[48] Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 176.
[49] William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 225.

the American most responsible for bringing theories of mesmerism into American religious life in the mid-nineteenth century, was a clockmaker, and like a clock, mind cure was a technology designed to harness energy and create an internal order in harmony with cosmological order. Historians have thoroughly charted the genealogy of mind cure in America, from Quimby's first metaphysical writings in the 1860s and Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures* in 1875 to its various institutional manifestations, beginning with Eddy's Church of Christ, Scientist, and branching outward to the New Thought denominations, most notably the Unity School of Christianity, Divine Science, and Religious Science.[50]

The belief system of mind cure postulated a correlation between the mind of the individual self and Mind as an expression of an omnipotent and omnipresent Divine. The techniques of mind cure—meditation, hypnosis, auto-suggestion, prayer—all focused on removing blockages between mind and Mind, and opening the self to Supply—of energy, of health, of wealth, of wisdom—that might then flow in infinite abundance. The title of the first New Thought bestseller, Ralph Waldo Trine's *In Tune With the Infinite* (1897), captured the means of mind cure perfectly; its subtitle, *Fullness of Peace, Power, and Plenty*, revealed its ends. Mind cure retained little of Calvinism's sense of divine mystery and otherness; God's power, it held, is here and to be used, now. The trick was to figure

[50] The best account of New Thought is Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*. See also Charles Braden, *Spirits in Rebellion: The Rise and Development of New Thought* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963); Gail Parker, *Mind Cure in New England: From the Civil War to World War I* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1973); and Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: Religion as Pop Psychology from Mary Baker Eddy to Oral Roberts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 73-93.

out how, and thus mind cure developed intellectually along the lines of a science, and in practice as a technology. "In short," historian Beryl Satter writes, "whether the goal was health and spiritual development or wealth and personal power, New Thought authors believed that the most basic challenge confronting them was how to understand the meanings of *mind*, and its relation to matter, heredity, and desire."[51] Those who claimed to understand Mind possessed insight into the deepest secrets of existence, a gnosticism for modern times.

Mind cure as a religious ideology held particular appeal for women. Donald Meyer describes mind cure as a post-Calvinist Protestant expression of "pure wish," but Satter more precisely characterizes New Thought as a "gendered discourse of desire."[52] Indeed, the institutional history of New Thought reveals a preponderance of white, middle-class women among both the leadership and adherents, especially in the urban centers of the North and Midwest where the movement was strongest. Healing, certainly, in nineteenth-century America was culturally constructed as a feminine pursuit, and Victorian sexual norms left "respectable" women, in particular, alienated from their bodies. These cultural factors, though critical, however, do not fully explain the appeal of mind cure to women. The ways print culture facilitated the emergence of textual communities centered on the home was also critical to mind cure's success among women, who often encountered these new teachings in print before reaching out to local communities. If the sudden transformation mind cure offered recalled the life-changing

[51] Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*, 9.
[52] Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*, 15.

power of evangelical conversion, its focus on the feminine aspects of the divine marked a radical departure from mainstream Protestantism.

The new psychology of the 1880s and 1890s emerged in response to the same liberal Protestant crisis, and with similar preoccupations as mind cure about the nature of mind, and about the connections between individual experience, on the one hand, and realities beyond individual consciousness on the other. Like mind cure, academic psychology offered a metaphysical science of healing. In fact, it makes little sense to distinguish psychology and mind cure prior to the 1880s, when the first academic psychology departments were founded in American universities; indeed, throughout the twentieth century the two discourses continued a regular intercourse in the arena of popular religion. "[T]he relationship between New Thought, a hybrid nineteenth-century religious-scientific discourse of selfhood, and popular psychology, the twentieth-century discourse of selfhood," Satter contends, "was more complex than a simple one-way absorption of New Thought by popular psychology. The two evolved somewhat in tandem, with a constant mutual influence."[53] Norman Vincent Peale, most famously, drew heavily on both psychoanalytic theory and the Unity School of Christianity in his hugely popular speeches and writings of the 1940s, 1950s, and later. The legitimacy of psychology in the twentieth century required it to renounce, sharply and deliberately, all ties with its popular religious cousins, but in the arena of lived religion, such high/low distinctions mattered little.

[53] Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*, 240.

Even a cursory glance at the biographies of the discipline's American founders—William James, G. Stanley Hall, George Coe, James Leuba, Edwin Starbuck, and James Mark Baldwin—reveals the liberal Protestant origins of psychology as an academic discipline in the United States.[54] All but James experienced an adolescent conversion experience, and each suffered personal crisis due to an inability to sustain conventional Protestant faith in the light of modern scientific revelations. But each yearned, regardless, for genuine experience of the divine. Not simply religion but the conversion experience itself, therefore, became a central preoccupation of early psychology. George Coe, for example, son of a Methodist minister, focused his research on a matter of great personal significance; in his words, "why is it that of two persons who have had the same bringing up, and who seek conversion with equal earnestness, one is ushered into the new life with shoutings and blowing of trumpets, as it were, while the other, however earnestly he may seek such experiences, never attains them at all[?]"[55] William James himself wrote often of his own inability to experience religion first-hand, though in *Varieties* he made clear that

[54] On the relationship of religious biography to the disciplinary history of psychology, see the autobiographical essays by Coe, Leuba, and Starbuck collected in Vergilius Ferm, ed., *Religion in Transition* (New York: Macmillan, 1937); and the series, which began publication in 1930, *A History of Psychology in Autobiography*, now in eight volumes. See also Peter Homans, "A Personal Struggle with Religion: Significant Fact in the Lives and Work of the First Psychologists," *The Journal of Religion* 62, no. 2 (April 1982): 128-144; and Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritua,l But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 123-151. Andrew Heinze contests this standard version of the origins of psychology in liberal Protestantism, noting that certain important early psychologists were Jewish. See Andrew Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). Nevertheless, the roots of psychology in religious efforts to fathom the relationship of the self to metaphysical realities beyond the conscious self remain clear.

[55] Quoted in Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 267.

first-hand experience was the essence of religious life. Scholars have speculated on the significance of the James family's Presbyterianism, and more critically James's father's Swedenborgian mysticism, on James's philosophy and psychology of religion; in any event, clearly James was driven by more than academic curiosity.[56] James's own support of psychical research, his public advocacy of the rights of mind-cure healers to practice, his criticisms of fellow scholars for excessive rationalism—such as when he chastised Boston University philosopher Borden Parker Bowne as "unsympathetic with the mystical needs of man"—all these indicate that the psychological investigations of James were not an effort to replace religious experience, but to recover it.[57] "James sought to abstract what he took to be [evangelical Protestantism's] mystical core," historian Ann Taves remarks, "in order that it might continue to engage him."[58] James, like Coe, Leuba, Hall, and the rest, approached the psychology of religion as an effort to understand the spiritual realities vital to full human life—yet seemingly so unattainable.

Though intramural squabbles naturally marked the formative years of psychology from 1890 to World War I, the massive outpouring of work in the psychology of religion reflected tremendous intellectual vitality and abiding spiritual angst. The most important works in the field were all efforts to refine the conversation begun with James's *Varieties* in

[56] See Mark R. Schwehn, "Making the World: William James and the Life of the Mind," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 30, no. 4 (1982): 426-453.
[57] Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 270.
[58] Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 271.

1902.[59] The young psychologists of religion that followed James and Hall all labored to use science itself as a means to keep religion viable in a modern scientific age. Some, like Coe and Leuba, proved less willing than James to accept emerging theories of the subconscious as adequate to the task of accounting for mystical experience. Much of this later skepticism proved decisive as psychology began its long process of withdrawal from its religious roots. But in the realm of popular religious life, the more open and pragmatic categories of James prevailed. James the scientist staunchly defended prayer and mystical experience, for example, and he stated from the beginning that his account would draw for its data mostly on religious autobiography. His famed definition of religion indicates most clearly his determination to place experience at the center of religious life. James's effort to define religion—"the feeling, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine"—does indeed reflect narrow liberal Protestant presuppositions, as critics have charged for a century; it does not hold up well under cross-cultural scrutiny.[60] But it is a marvelously constructed starting point for a psychology of religion designed precisely to help liberal Protestant moderns retain spiritual vitality; later American inspirational writers turned to James precisely because of his applicability to those seeking meaning, happiness, and wholeness in a modern, consumerist, psychologically oriented culture.

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[59] For an account of Jamesian psychology and academic theology, see Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2003), 216-285.

[60] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999 [1902]), 36.

The trait that made *Varieties* the most influential of all the early-twentieth-century psychologies of religion is the deftness with which James bridged liberal Protestant intellectual culture and the wider religious currents of mysticism and mind cure, all while legitimating, rather than reductionistically dismissing, religious experience. The most celebrated of James's analytic distinctions—between the healthy-minded "once born" and the "twice-born" sick souls—inverts common-sense assumptions, and elevates the sick souls, as Charles Taylor notes, as those most open to profound experience and meaningful insight.[61] James went so far as to praise the "pathological features" of religious geniuses, and linked these pathologies to the very mystical experiences he and his colleagues were postulating as the very essence of religion itself. George Fox, the eccentric founder of the Society of Friends, for example, served for James as a model of the virtues of the sick soul. "The Quaker religion which he founded," James wrote, "is something which it is impossible to overpraise. In a day of shams, it was a religion of veracity rooted in spiritual inwardness. . . . So far as our Christian sects of today are evolving into liberality, they are simply reverting in essence to the position which Fox and the early Quakers so long ago assumed."[62]

In addition to praising the sick soul of George Fox, James also devoted considerable attention to the mind-cure philosophies he took as emblematic of the more simple religion of healthy-mindedness. James quoted in *Varieties* extensively from Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite*, describing, without condescension, what he found there as "traces

[61] Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 33-34.
[62] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 9.

of Christian mysticism, of transcendental idealism, of vedantism, and of the modern psychology of the subliminal self."[63] *Varieties* proved so useful to later writers because it brought under the universal umbrella of science experiences ranging from evangelical conversion, to mind-cure healing, psychical phenomena, and mystical rapport with the More, without reducing any of these to neurology or the psychology of the subconscious. In this enterprise, many religious innovators recognized a kindred spirit. "In his effort to mediate between religion and psychology," Taves aptly summarizes, "James shared much with the new religious movements, such as Spiritualism, Theosophy, and, especially New Thought." James's work "brought a new legitimacy and prestige to these popular movements" and they capitalized eagerly on this legitimacy, as did later popular writers, enabling these alternative spiritualities to became increasingly central to the literature of soul care in the twentieth century.[64]

Coe, Leuba, Starbuck, and others in the years from 1902 through the First World War continued to debate, in academic settings, the significance of what James achieved in *The Varieties of Religious Experience.* The first significant effort to translate the *Varieties* for a popular audience, to make it useful in the daily struggle of life, however, came from the Quaker philosopher Rufus Jones. Jones had studied James's *Principles of Psychology* intensively when it appeared in 1890, and taught courses in Jamesian psychology at Haverford College in the 1890s. In 1900-1901 he went to Harvard for graduate study, though disappointingly found James to be in Europe preparing for the Gifford Lectures

[63] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 114.
[64] Taves, *Fits, Trances, Visions*, 272.

that would become *Varieties*. In spite of his appreciation of James's psychology, Jones—unlike James and his fellow psychologists—lived a life in regular communion with the world beyond; he was a birthright Quaker and therefore came by his mysticism as honestly as James did his post-Calvinist New England angst. After returning to Haverford, Jones set out to produce a work that would make Jamesian psychology and his own Quaker mysticism available to a reading public also struggling with matters of faith, science, and authentic experience. "There are few crises to compare," Jones wrote, "with that which appears when the simple, childhood religion, imbibed at mother's knee and absorbed from early home and church environment, comes into collision with a scientific, solidly reasoned system."[65] Jones, like the early psychologists, knew this from first-hand experience, yet unlike them he emerged with a deep sense of divine presence intact.

Social Law in the Spiritual World, published in 1904, was Jones's attempt to aid fellow travelers through just this crisis. It was both a brilliant re-interpretation of James by a practicing mystic and a sadly overlooked bridge between James and the popular inspirational writers of the twentieth century. Though it never achieved wide sales, it does offer a first glimpse into the ways the pragmatic openness of Jamesian psychology functioned as inspiration. "The trouble with many of the best works on these themes," Jones wrote in the introduction, "is that they are too learned and technical to help the wayfaring man who wants to get the newer insight and who yet cannot find any way to get into the onward moving current. This present book is an attempt to help such

[65] Rufus M. Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World: Studies in Human and Divine Inter-Relationship* (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Co., 1904), 9-10.

persons."[66] One such person was Harry Emerson Fosdick, later to become one of the nation's greatest preachers and a bestselling author, but who in 1904 was twenty-six years old and "struggling to find a footing in his faith." Jones's *Social Law in a Spiritual World*, Fosdick wrote later, "opened the door to a new era in my thought and life. . . . [M]uch of my message has been rooted in the rich soil which that book provided."[67] This work by Rufus Jones merits close scrutiny because of its status as an early effort to incorporate Jamesian psychology into a living religious system, and because of its own influence on later popular writers like Fosdick.

Jamesian psychology taught that all knowledge and all experience is mediated through consciousness; yet Jones, as a mystic, also held that God can only be apprehended through this very same medium—the conscious experience of an individual personality. The study of personality—psychology—therefore became a critical tool of spiritual development. "[I]f we could drop our plummet down though the deeps of one personality we could tell all the meanings of the visible world, all the problems of social life and all the secrets of the eternal Personal Self."[68] Critics have recently made the convincing argument that liberal religion—Protestantism in particular—suffered a spiritual malaise in the twentieth century largely due to an over-eager embrace of scientific psychology.[69] Jones, too, embraced science and psychology, but he tempered it

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[66] Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 15.
[67] Harry Emerson Fosdick, ed., *Rufus Jones Speaks to Our Time: An Anthology* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), v.
[68] Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 66.
[69] See Keith G. Meador, "'My Own Salvation': The *Christian Century* and Psychology's Secularizing of American Protestantism," in Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution:*

with mystical experience, and thereby kept psychology from crowding out spiritual vitality.

In *Social Law,* Jones took what he understood to be the fundamental lessons of the new psychology and applied them to the mystical heart of his Quaker tradition. The most central lesson he gleaned from psychology is that humans are not discrete individuals; all that we do and are is relational. Here Jones connected the psychological and the mystical with the social. One of the central themes of his scholarship in the history of mysticism is that mystical experience itself, as he put it, "flourishes best in a group."[70] This, of course, reflects more than anything else the communal mystical practice that is Quaker silent worship. As Jones phrased the same idea in *Social Law*, "*No man can be holy unto himself.*"[71] With this understanding of the relationship of soul, self, and society, Jones was able to develop his concept of the nature of mysticism. He grouped mystics into two classes: negation mystics and affirmation mystics. The first class sought what Abraham Maslow would later call "peak experiences," the ecstatic rapture of union with the divine. Jones regarded such experiences, when sought as ends in themselves, as spiritual escapism. Rather, he looked to the affirmation mystics for guidance. Such mystics, with whom he certainly hoped to class himself, "do not make *vision* the end of life, but rather the beginning. . . . More important than the vision is obedience to the

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Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 269-309.

[70] Rufus M. Jones, *New Studies In Mystical Religion*; as quoted in Elizabeth Gray Vining, *Friend of Life: The Biography of Rufus M. Jones* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1958), 257-258.

[71] Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 19-20. Italics original.

vision."[72] For the affirmation mystic, the solitary, personal, inward, mystical experience, which for Jones always lay at the heart of spiritual life, was to be valued only insofar as it empowered the participant to service in the world. "The truth test is to be sought, not in the feeling-state, but in the motor-effects,"[73] he wrote, reflecting James. For Jones, the test of mystical experience was its social utility. Jones, in *Social Law*, argued that modern psychology and timeless mystical practice, taken together, offered a path through the thickets of modern life, a path ultimately of personal and social salvation. His adaptation of William James was but the first in a long line of similar twentieth-century efforts.

CONCLUSION

Rufus Jones wrote *Social Law* in 1904 to help distraught moderns find personally and socially useful religious experiences. Less than twenty years later, he joined a wide-reaching effort, Religious Book Week, designed to encourage Americans to read books like *Social Law in the Spiritual World* and the many others offering the latest wisdom to troubled souls. The 1920s witnessed a remarkable renaissance of religious publishing, and a host of marketing innovations devised to get more books, and the right books, into the hands of readers, and to educate those readers about how to read those books. What emerged was a religious middlebrow culture that freshly asserted the centrality of books and reading in middle-class religious life, and that reconfigured the relationships among individual autonomy, institutional authority, and cultural expertise. Liberal religious

[72] Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 152, 153.
[73] Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 198.

leaders like Rufus Jones turned to William James—and the discourses of mysticism, mind cure, and psychology more broadly—in their efforts to create and promote a reading culture that just might hold together a spiritual center for a fragmenting culture; American readers turned to these books seeking spiritual centers for their own lives. And in the rough-and-tumble encounters between those books and those readers, new meanings were made, and new forms of spirituality were born.

Chapter 1: Enlarging the Faith: Books and the Marketing of Liberal Religion in a Mass Culture

When President Warren G. Harding's brief note arrived in the New York offices of the Religious Book Week Committee in the late winter of 1922, the committee's members must have been elated. Harding's letter, written "to endorse the program [of the Religious Book Week] for the wider circulation of books of a religious character," surely provided a great sense of validation for organizers of the fledgling enterprise, embarking that spring on only their second annual effort. Harding's message, however, transcended simple pleasantries. Writing with the carnage of Verdun and the Somme still clearly on his mind, he told the bookmen of New York that the wider reading of religious books was essential so "that the world may become morally fit. Unless this is done, trained bodies and trained minds may simply add to the destructive forces of the world."[1] Many Americans in the years before the war had placed great faith in technical expertise and reinvigorated masculinity—in "trained bodies and trained minds"—but now Harding understood such training alone to be inadequate to meet the challenges of a rapidly modernizing society. At a time when professionals, artists, and intellectuals were shedding ties to religion, Harding contended that American life needed a moral center, a center that just might be found in religious books.[2]

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[1] Warren G. Harding to Religious Book Week Committee, February 27, 1922, published in *Publishers' Weekly*, April 1, 1922. Harding's note was often trumpeted in subsequent Religious Book Week publicity.

[2] On the developments in social science in these years, especially the tensions between positivistic and moralistic conceptions of the field, see Mark C. Smith, *Social Science in the*

This chapter explores Religious Book Week and other developments in religious book publishing and promotion in the 1920s. The transformation of the business in religious books grew out of the hopes and fears of liberal religious leaders as they grappled with their declining cultural influence, expanding consumerism, and a pervasive postwar spiritual malaise. As they moved to use religious publishing to reassert cultural influence and generate spiritual renewal, these bookmen and church leaders created a thriving religious middlebrow culture. The twin aims of asserting influence and providing renewal required an expansion of the very idea of "the religious" itself, and the book weeks, book lists, and book clubs that characterized the new publishing and promotional enterprises brought this enlarged religious sensibility to the reading public. Religious middlebrow culture emerged in the 1920s as a primary framework through which middle-class moderns made sense of scientific advancements, theological controversies, and increasing social pluralism. As a carrier of broadened and liberalized notions of religion, middlebrow culture also transformed the ways American readers experienced spiritual community, cared for the needs of their souls, and encountered the transcendent. The promotion of a broadened sense of the religious through the marketplace for books encouraged and legitimated a culture of seeking that would become increasingly central to liberal religion in the twentieth century.

Crucible: The American Debate over Objectivity and Purpose, 1918-1941 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994); and R. Laurence Moore, "Secularization: Religion and the Social Sciences," in William R. Hutchinson, ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 233-252.

CULTURAL CRISIS AND RELIGIOUS PUBLISHING IN THE 1920S

Harding's note to the Religious Book Week Committee—read from thousands of pulpits and reprinted in newspapers across the country—reflected widespread anxieties in the years after World War I, anxieties about the nature and direction of Western civilization itself.[3] The sheer destructiveness of the Great War led critics to question liberal assumptions about progress that had prevailed for decades. Many religious leaders who had zealously championed American intervention in Europe—sharing Woodrow Wilson's evangelical faith in American democracy—now repented of their earlier militarism, and turned instead to isolationism and pacifism. Walter Lippmann, writing at the end of the 1920s, simply declared, "the promises of liberalism have not been fulfilled."[4] In his brilliant *A Preface to Morals*, Lippmann announced that examples of liberalism's failed promises

> lie all about us: in the brave and brilliant atheists who have defied the Methodist God, and have become very nervous; in the women who have emancipated themselves from the tyranny of fathers, husbands, and homes . . . with the intermittent help of a psychoanalyst; in the young men and women who are world weary at twenty-two; in the multitudes who drug themselves with pleasure; . . . in the millions, at last free to think without fear of priest or policeman, who have made the moving pictures and the popular newspapers what they are.[5]

While postwar disillusionment struck with greater force in European societies than in the United States, Americans in the 1920s also struggled to cope with the disconnect between

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[3] For a discussion of the Harding letter and its use in pulpits and newspapers, see Marion Humble, "Religious Book Week," in *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 16 no. 4 (July 1922): 296. For more on the ties between the American Library Association and Religious Book Week, see Chapter 2.

[4] Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 6.

[5] Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, 6.

progressive expectations and postwar realities. For those attuned to European intellectual life this may have meant, in religious terms, an embrace of the Protestant neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth, which stressed the sovereignty and inscrutable otherness of God; millions more in the United States found security in the certainties of an emergent fundamentalism.[6] But countless Americans, dissatisfied with orthodoxies old and new, found themselves unmoored. "These are the prisoners who have been released," Lippmann announced. "Yet the result is not so good as they thought it would be. The prison door is wide open. They stagger out into trackless space under a blinding sun. They find it nerve-wracking."[7]

Harding had campaigned on a "return to normalcy" in his successful 1920 presidential bid, but there was no turning back, and observers all around, like Lippmann, noted just how much the world had changed in a few short years. Many of the most significant of the changes—increasing urbanism and pluralism, the rise of a mass culture, and pervasive middle-class consumerism, to name but a few—had roots stretching back before the war, yet these changes hit the American public with full force in the early 1920s. Historian Lynn Dumenil notes that many Americans in these years experienced "a growing consciousness of change, a perception that a yawning gulf separated them

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[6] For an account of the interface of fundamentalism and the consumer culture of the period, written by a fundamentalist scholar, see Douglas Carl Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001). See also George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

[7] Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, 7.

from the world of only a decade before."[8] These social and cultural changes, she writes, "challenged tradition, religion, rational order, and progress."[9] American intellectuals embraced with renewed vigor Freudian psychology, literary modernism, surrealist art, the new physics, historical biblical criticism, and evolutionary biology. Other Americans turned their discontent into violent rage; race riots swept the country in 1919 in the midst of the social tensions of the Great Migration, and the revived Ku Klux Klan gained a measure of political influence and legitimacy it had not enjoyed even during its previous heyday under Reconstruction.

This postwar turmoil added to already pronounced strains in American cultural and religious life, especially the twin crises of masculinity and churchly authority that had been developing since the 1890s, and now reached a climax in the 1920s. With the closing of the frontier in 1890 and the rise of massive corporate bureaucracies, many American men feared that "overcivilization" was sapping them of independence and virility. Theodore Roosevelt's 1899 oration on the "Strenuous Life," which called for American imperialism, linked national and racial power to the strength of American manhood, since, in the struggle of nations, "the one with the most superior manhood" would lead "human racial advancement toward a higher civilization."[10] Roosevelt's was far from a lonely voice. The national, racial, and spiritual dangers of diminished manliness, in fact, inspired numerous reform efforts, including psychologist G. Stanley

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[8] Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 9.
[9] Dumenil, *Modern Temper*, 148.
[10] Gail Bederman, *Manhood and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 184.

Hall's proposal to allow boys in kindergarten to act on their violent impulses without punishment. Hall's proposal met with a firestorm of criticism, yet other efforts to inculcate manly vigor were readily adopted across the nation, including football, which quickly emerged as a national passion in American educational institutions, and the Boy Scouts, brought to the United States from England in 1912 to allow boys yet another escape from the confines of civilization.[11] In religious circles, the crisis of masculinity spurred an enthusiasm for "muscular Christianity" among liberals and conservatives alike, including renewed efforts, in art and literature, to redefine Jesus in manly terms, in contrast to the effeminate Jesus of nineteenth-century evangelicalism.[12] The short-lived Men and Religion Forward Movement, and the hyperactive revivals of former baseball player Billy Sunday, were matched by a torrent of books, including Harry Emerson Fosdick's *Manhood of the Master* (1913) and Bruce Barton's *A Young Man's Jesus* (1914), all seeking to rescue American men, and American Christianity, from the emasculating and enervating onslaughts of feminized evangelical piety and stifling modern civilization.

The hope of those promoting this "muscular Christianity" was to make religion more appealing to men, who attended weekly services in far fewer numbers than their

[11] Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 77-78.

[12] See Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2003), 87-123; David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 97-123; and Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

mothers, wives, and daughters.[13] The gender imbalance in the pews, a longstanding reality of American religious life, was matched, however, by the much greater gender imbalance in the pulpit, so for all the angst over feminized religion, the institutional church in the early twentieth century remained a bastion of male power. For most of American history, dominance of the pulpit carried significant cultural authority, but clerical power, as a force in the wider culture, began to erode in the late nineteenth century, and this erosion simply accelerated amid the cultural transitions of the 1920s. Church historian Robert Handy has called the 1920s the period of a "second disestablishment" and a "religious depression," noting that "the realities of postwar life were proving difficult to understand and address within the familiar styles of Protestant thought and piety." The loss of ministerial authority stemmed from numerous factors, including schisms over doctrine (the so-called "modernist-fundamentalist controversy") and increasingly accepted scientific understandings of both the natural world and human nature. Yet even more broadly, notes Handy, "the direction of social change, demographic trends, and urban patterns was against the dominance of an acculturated Protestantism with its . . . rural nostalgia."[14] Sociologist Robert Lynd, in *Middletown*, his masterful study of Muncie, Indiana conducted in the mid-1920s, reduced the matter of clerical authority to even simpler terms. He recorded "an impression of ministers as

[13] Stephen Prothero reports on a 1910 survey conduct by the YMCA that determined that men accounted for only one-third of church attendance in the United States. Prothero, *American Jesus*, 93.

[14] Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 200-201, 205; Handy, "The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935," *Church History* 29 (March 1960): 3-16.

eagerly lingering about the fringes of things trying to get a chance to talk to the men of the city."[15] Liberal Protestants, unused to life on the fringes and struggling to maintain cultural influence, naturally felt the beginnings of this "second disestablishment" with great acuity, while critics such as H. L. Mencken howled with delight.[16]

This array of cultural and spiritual anxieties—postwar disillusionment and anomie, the perceived crisis of masculinity, and the waning of liberal Protestant institutional power—lay behind the transformation of the religious book business in the 1920s. Historian William Hutchinson describes the period as "an era in which, more than any other, the quest for cultural authority [by liberal Protestants] had become a matter of conscious intent and of programmed institutional expression."[17] Publishers seeking greater sales in an expanding consumer marketplace, and religious leaders recognizing the threats to their cultural influence, turned to the mass media of print. At the center of liberal theology was the notion of redeeming the entire social order for

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[15] Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929), 350.

[16] See Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 895-917; Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion, Vol. 2: The Noise of Conflict, 1919-1941* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 15-58. One must be careful equating the term "liberal" with the term "Protestant establishment," for while it is true that theological liberals predominated in leadership positions in seminaries, denominational bureaucracies, and various ecumenical enterprises, the denominations of the so-called mainline—Congregationalists, white Methodists and Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Lutherans—still contained many lay people in the first half of the twentieth century who rejected the tenets of theological liberalism. The efforts of the religious reading programs described in this chapter to bring theological liberalism to the public were aimed just as strongly at members of their own denominations as at those in the wider culture. See William R. Hutchinson, "Introduction," in Hutchinson, *Between the Times*, 13-16.

[17] William R. Hutchinson, "Preface," in Hutchinson, *Between the Times*, xii.

Christ, and so integral to the expansion of religious book sales was an effort to broaden and redefine the very meaning of "the religious." A more capacious understanding of "religious" and the aggressive marketing of these re-cast religious books allowed publishers and church leaders to accomplish their ends—increased sales, cultural redemption, and spiritual revitalization—while enhancing their own status as cultural arbiters. By marrying cutting-edge business practices with a liberal religious outlook, these leaders aimed to create new markets for books while fortifying the spiritual life of those middle-class Americans struggling to cope with the dislocations of modernity.

Religious Book Week was but one part of this sweeping transformation in the way religious books were marketed and sold. Publishing executives and liberal religious leaders, including leaders of the Federal Council of Churches, looked at the changing cultural, religious, and business environment—both the perils and promises of modernity—and saw an opportunity. In addition to instituting the Religious Book Week, these leaders produced a variety of book lists, including a critical list from the American Library Association, and a variety of book clubs, beginning with the Religious Book Club itself, founded in 1927. In the process, they created a thriving religious middlebrow culture, one that shared with the larger middlebrow sensibility both a democratic impulse to bring the latest ideas to the widest audience possible and, concurrently, an enhanced role for experts to guide readers through the confusing cultural marketplace.

For all the cultural and spiritual tumult of the decade, the 1920s were also a period of economic expansion and increasing material abundance, making hopes of salvation through literary consumerism not seem entirely outlandish. Historian Ann

Douglas describes America in 1920 as "a Cinderella magically clothed in the most stunning dress at the ball," as if the nation had somehow escaped the drudgery of its past and entered a fairy-tale future. "[I]mmense gains with no visible price tag," she writes, "seemed to be the American destiny."[18] The nation was indeed prosperous, especially after the postwar depression of 1920-1922 abated, and now finally at peace. The interwar years, according to historian Richard Wightman Fox, were "the critical decades in the consolidation of modern American consumer society. It was in those interwar years," he claims, "that the characteristic institutions and habits of consumer culture—the motion picture, the radio, the automobile, the weekly photo-magazine, installment buying, the five-day work week, suburban living, to mention a few—assumed the central place that they still occupy in American life."[19] The now-standard images of the 1920s as a decade of decadence—the "roaring twenties" of Gatsby and Harlem, flappers and jazz—capture the notion of the era as one of economic prosperity, cultural renaissance, and spiritual liberation.

The liberal religious agenda for books was, therefore, from the beginning, characterized by fear and hope, by yearning for the past and faith in the future. The modern bookmen shared a sense of cultural and spiritual crisis, but also an optimistic faith in modern promotional strategies to bring their product to needy consumers. Among leaders of the book business and their allies in the churches, nostalgia for the

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[18] Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 4.

[19] Richard Wightman Fox, "Epitaph for Middletown: Robert S. Lynd and the Analysis of Consumer Culture," in Fox and Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 103.

moral and social life of the nineteenth-century village commingled with excitement over the advancing economic and intellectual possibilities of the modern, twentieth-century city. The initiatives these publishers and clergymen created, especially Religious Book Week and the Religious Book Club, embodied these tensions and contradictions. By employing the marketing sophistication of the emerging mass culture, the promoters of the book weeks and book clubs bolstered the consumer ethic as a prevailing cultural norm. Yet even as the book weeks and book clubs furthered the reach of consumerism, religious middlebrow culture also cut against the deadening emptiness of consumer culture, offering countless readers an expanded spiritual horizon.

RELIGIOUS BOOK WEEK (1921-1927)

The idea for a special week to promote the reading and buying of religious books was hatched in the fall of 1920. A group of twenty representatives of general religious publishers, including the Fleming H. Revell Co., Thomas Nelson & Sons, the Presbyterian Board of Publication, and the Association Press (the publishing arm of the YMCA) met in November at the New York headquarters of the National Association of Book Publishers, under the leadership of Frederic G. Melcher, Executive Secretary of the NABP. Inspired by the book campaigns of World War I, and even more by Melcher's successful Children's Book Week, inaugurated in 1919, these publishing leaders quickly set about the business of revolutionizing the ways religious books were marketed and sold in the United States. A committee formed to devise improved marketing strategies for local booksellers, including strategies to enhance traditional advertising in newspapers

and denominational journals, suggestions for cooperative ventures with churches and Sunday schools, and advice on better counter and window displays. The committee, with a budget of $1,940, produced a pamphlet containing these suggestions, and distributed thirty-five hundred copies to book dealers across the country. In addition, the committee sent out ten thousand posters for display in churches, schools, libraries, and bookshops. This marketing blitz, conducted throughout the winter and spring of 1920-1921, reached a climax with Religious Book Week itself, held March 13-20, 1921. When the first Religious Book Week arrived, so had modern marketing to the field of religious books.

Melcher, the Chairman of the Religious Book Week Committee, was perhaps the most influential book promoter of the twentieth-century, and a driving force in bringing modern business practices to the selling of books.[20] After stints at bookstores in Boston and Indianapolis, beginning as a receiving clerk at age sixteen, Melcher came to New York in 1918 to assume the editorship of *Publishers' Weekly*, the flagship publishing trade journal, a position he held for the next forty years. In the early 1920s, in addition to his work with *Publishers' Weekly* and the National Association of Book Publishers, Melcher also served for a period as secretary of the American Booksellers Association. These positions, first in retail and later at the very center of the New York publishing establishment,

[20] The most complete source of biographical information on Melcher is the obituary in *Publishers' Weekly*, March 18, 1963, 16-19, 36. See also *Frederic G. Melcher: Friendly Reminiscences of a Half Century Among Books and Bookmen* (New York: Book Publishers Bureau, 1945), a compilation of tributes to Melcher; and Ellen D. Gilbert, "*Publishers' Weekly*, the Depression, and World War II," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 59, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 59-82.

afforded Melcher a unique opportunity to observe all sides of the book business, and he made the most of it.

Melcher arrived in New York just as the book business entered a critical period of professionalization. Book publishers and sellers, steeped in the genteel tradition, had typically viewed their work as a vocation more than a profession, closer in spirit to teaching or the ministry than to standard business endeavors. For this reason, publishers had long resisted professionalization, especially the trend toward scientific management that had transformed so many other business enterprises in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[21] A brief effort to establish a trade association, the American Publishers Association, foundered on anti-trust grounds soon after it was organized in 1900. Incremental changes occurred—the American Booksellers Association was established in 1901, and publishers' advertising budgets increased significantly in the years around 1900—but, in general, industry-wide change did not arrive until after the First World War.

The changes in the business side of publishing after the war stemmed partly from shifting demographics and partly from a cultural and generational shift among book industry insiders. The 1920 census revealed that the United States had crossed a significant threshold—it had become an urban nation for the first time, with more than

[21] See especially Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

50 percent of the population living in cities.[22] In addition, over the course of the decade, the number of high school and college graduates each more than doubled. This urban population, wealthier and better educated than any in history, and enjoying greater leisure time than ever with the spread of the eight-hour workday, made the 1920s a "golden age" for publishing. Book publishers seized the opportunity these developments presented, and by the end of the decade were issuing over ten thousand titles annually, up from six thousand in 1920.[23]

While demographic change provided new opportunities, the modernization of the book business itself was the accomplishment of a new breed of executives. These young leaders were men "who came to publishing with interest and appreciation, rather than skepticism and contempt, for modern business practices, particularly advertising and marketing," and they quickly set about changing the old ways.[24] This new generation—future giants of publishing, including Alfred Knopf, Donald Brace, Alfred Harcourt, Richard Simon, Max Schuster, John Farrar, Stanley Reinhart, and Bennett Cerf—shared many of the traditional, non-commercial values so cherished by previous generations of publishers, yet nevertheless saw how advertising firms such as J. Walter Thompson, N. W. Ayer, and Lord and Thomas were transforming American business, and hoped

[22] As Lynn Dumenil notes, the Census Bureau's definition of a city included any population center of more than twenty-five hundred, a very low number for any realistic understanding of urban life. This may diminish somewhat the importance of this watershed moment, yet the census findings did contribute to Americans' sense of their society as one in flux.

[23] Joan Shelley Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 31.

[24] Trysh Travis, "Reading Matters: Book Men, 'Serious' Readers, and the Rise of Mass Culture, 1930-1965" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1998), 34.

"advertising could help them increase distribution of books in the same way advertising had increased the distribution of other goods."[25] J. W. Clinger of the American Baptist Publication Society stated the case for advertising most succinctly. In an address on "The Advertising of Religious Books" delivered in 1923, he pronounced advertising "a positive, creative force." "Modern advertising," he declared, "has made the luxuries of yesterday the necessities of today. It fills the human mind with new and fascinating yearnings."[26]

In addition to advertising, publishers turned to a variety of other marketing schemes. Some were flops, such as proposals to sell books by telegraph or aboard railways, but others proved to be lasting successes, such as the establishment of mass-appeal literary reviews like the *Saturday Review of Literature*, which first appeared in 1920 under the editorship of Henry Seidel Canby.[27] Many city newspapers also expanded their book review sections in the early 1920s, further increasing the public exposure of new books. Alfred Knopf instituted yet another innovation, bringing greater marketing sophistication to book design by "combining a commitment to high-quality paper and

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[25] Catherine Turner, *Marketing Modernism Between the Two World Wars* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 31.

[26] J. W. Clinger, "The Advertising of Religious Books," an address delivered to the Publishers' Group of the International Sunday School Council of Religious Education, meeting in Chicago, February 21, 1923. Reprinted in *Publishers' Weekly*, March 24, 1923, 1007. On advertising, see Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976); T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

[27] John Tebbel, *Between Covers: The Rise and Transformation of Book Publishing in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 307-311.

unique typefaces with jackets designed to look different from other company's books."[28] Perhaps most important in the professional development of the industry was the creation in 1920 of the National Association of Book Publishers, the first significant publishing trade association. The NABP functioned as the driving force behind many of the critical innovations of the decade, including Religious Book Week.

When Frederic Melcher arrived in New York in 1918, to work for *Publisher's Weekly* and, soon, the NABP, he quickly established himself as an important innovator in this new business climate. But Melcher did not begin his experiments in the field of religion; he first made his mark promoting children's books. In 1922 he instituted the Newbery Medal for the best children's book, followed in 1937 by the Caldecott Medal, awarded for the best children's picture book. Alongside the Book-of-the-Month Club and, more recently, Oprah's book club, these awards have likely been the most successful marketing devices in the history of American publishing, continuing to drive sales of children's book into the twenty-first century. In addition to these lasting contributions, in 1919 he co-founded, with Franklin K. Mathiews, librarian of the Boy Scouts, the Children's Book Week, the first effort to devote a week annually to the promotion of a particular kind of reading, and the direct inspiration for the Religious Book Weeks to come. Melcher's innovations in the marketing of children's books were among the first efforts of the new generation of bookmen to experiment with modern marketing techniques, and the experiment proved a tremendous success.

[28] Turner, *Marketing Modernism*, 87.

Children's Book Week soon developed into a model for other book-promotion campaigns. As part of the shift in the industry toward scientific management, in late 1930 the NABP hired Orion H. Cheney, former-vice president of the Irving Trust Company of New York, to lead a committee of researchers in a systematic review of the new business practices adopted across the industry in the 1920s. When the Cheney team published its report in 1931, among its many findings was the conclusion that Melcher's Children's Book Week had been a development of great significance in book promotion. Publishers had long noticed the greater difficulty they faced in developing a brand than marketers of other commodities; consumers simply did not consider the publisher when making a book-buying decision. In light of this challenge, Earnest Elmo Calkins, an advertising expert, had advised publishers in 1922 to focus their advertising dollars on general reading promotions rather than specific books. Though his advice was not widely accepted by industry leaders, Cheney concluded that precisely this aspect of the Children's Book Week made it a model promotional program. The book week, in effect, by simply advocating children's reading, made teachers and librarians into book-hawkers, which not only promoted wholesome reading but also encouraged book buying. "The most promising of these manifestations," Cheney wrote of efforts to build bridges between booksellers and schools and libraries, "is the remarkable way in which the cooperation of the libraries has been developed in the promotion of Children's Book Week."[29]

[29] O. H. Cheney, *Economic Survey of the Book Industry, 1930-1931* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1931), 45. Travis, in "Reading Matters," discusses the Cheney Survey at length.

Enlisting schools and libraries, and later churches, to promote books proved successful in large part because campaigns of this kind worked as advertising while remaining free of the stigma of conventional advertising. Children's books—and, soon, religious books—were the first books to receive systematic promotion precisely because they were the books least likely to be seen as mere commodities. Even as modern business practices transformed the industry in the 1920s, many publishers still saw their profession as cultural work rather than simply commercial, and they were loath to turn a book into just one among all the other goods for sale to eager consumers. By promoting reading among children, or reading of religious books, publishers could experiment with innovative marketing practices without tarnishing either their self-image or their public reputations as stewards of cherished cultural values. As the Cheney Survey noted, the effectiveness of the Children's Book Week "has been built up by the painstaking enlistment of the cooperation of the logical agencies concerned with education and child welfare—and by the careful conservation of the prestige and good-will of the industry."[30] Contrary to techniques that might work in other fields, "the principle of the work of the Children's Book Week has been as sound as that of any cooperative promotion campaign we have studied," the Cheney survey team wrote, "for the very reason that it avoided a big advertising campaign . . . and press agent ballyhoo."[31]

When Melcher assumed the leadership of the Religious Book Week Committee in the fall of 1920, he drew naturally on his experience with Children's Book Week. Not

[30] Cheney, *Economic Survey of the Book Industry*, 68-69.
[31] Cheney, *Economic Survey of the Book Industry*, 68.

surprisingly, Religious Book Week, like its predecessor, was quickly a smashing success. Accounts of the campaign appeared in *Literary Digest* and the book sections of *The New York Times* and *New York Herald*, in addition to other leading newspapers across the country. Denominational and other religious periodicals, including *The Baptist*, *The Intelligencer*, *The Christian Register*, *Lutheran Christian Herald*, *Sunday School Times*, *The Continent*, *The Watchword*, *Central Christian Advocate*, *Presbyterian of the South*, and *New Era Magazine*, devoted special issues to the book week, greatly enhancing national awareness. (The Rufus Jones essay on "The Habit of Reading" appeared in *The Watchword* that March.) Articles in *The Baptist* included "A Man and His Books," by Baptist rising star Harry Emerson Fosdick; "The Place of Religious Books in the Home"; and "Books I Should Like My Pastor to Read," written by a layman, and "Books I Should Like My People to Read," written by a pastor.[32] The *Sunday School Times* carried a piece on "Reading to Steady One's Faith," while the *Central Christian Advocate* published "Is Reading a Lost Art?" by Clifton D. Gray, the president of Bates College.[33] Melcher himself puffed the undertaking in a long essay for *The New York Times*. Religious Book Week, before the first book had even sold, commanded the attention of the press, secular and religious, across the country.[34]

In addition to garnering free press, the organizers of Religious Book Week worked tirelessly to coordinate their efforts with local congregations, booksellers, libraries, and

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[32] *The Baptist*, the weekly magazine of the Northern Baptist Convention. March 5, 1921. (The Northern Baptist Convention, founded in 1907, changed its named to the American Baptist Convention in 1950 and American Baptist Churches in the USA in 1972.)
[33] "Religious Book Week Finds Wide Support," *Publishers' Weekly*, March 12, 1921, 778.
[34] Frederic G. Melcher, "Religious Books and Their Readers," *The New York Times Book Review*, March 20, 1921, 8.

religious groups, applying the strategies from Children's Book Week that the Cheney Survey would later find so compelling. Churches across the country arranged books for display on the Sunday of book week, often tied to book-themed sermons. An influential Detroit pastor, Gaius Glenn Atkins, even noted in 1922 that there "is more preaching from books than possibly ever before," a boon to booksellers since "notice from the pulpit will set more people to reading a book than possibly any other advertisement."[35] Frederic Melcher, meanwhile, courted librarians at the 1921 meeting of the American Library Association, and in 1922 the ALA passed a resolution encouraging all public and theological libraries in the nation to "co-operate fully" with Religious Book Week.[36] *Publishers' Weekly* even received reports of city newspapers displaying books on religious themes in their offices.

Not surprisingly, however, denominations and other national organizations proved the most enthusiastic allies of Religious Book Week. The YMCA sent a four-page leaflet to six thousand YMCA branches with suggestions for ways to participate in the campaign, arguing that religious literature is "indispensable" because of "how close a relation it bears to questions of daily living."[37] Similar materials were sent to clergy from denominational headquarters, including seventeen thousand circulars from the Methodist

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[35] Gaius Glenn Atkins, "The Church and the Library," an abstract of remarks presented to the Libraries of Religion and Theology Round Table of the American Library Association. Published in *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 16, no. 4 (July 1922): 298.

[36] See "Libraries of Religion and Theology Round Table" in *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 16, no. 4 (July 1922): 299.

[37] YMCA leaflet, quoted in "Religious Book Week Finds Wide Support," *Publishers' Weekly*, March 12, 1921, 778.

home office, eight thousand from the Baptists, and six thousand from the Presbyterians. The Methodist denominational leadership encouraged every congregation in the nation to participate with its small circular about Religious Book Week, entitled "Seven Good Reasons for Observing It in Every Methodist Church." In addition to declaring that religious reading would "help to construct worthy ideals of living thru the inculcation of right ideas of life," the Methodist promotional guide also encouraged buying and reading religious books because "It will enrich the atmosphere and increase the attractiveness of the home" and "It will encourage the assembly of the family about the evening lamp."[38]

The Methodists' encouragement to buy books to "increase the attractiveness of the home" and "encourage the assembly of the family" indicates how thoroughly values of consumerism and community intermingled in Religious Book Week. Indeed, book week organizers frequently noted the importance of word-of-mouth advertising to the success of religious book sales, a form of advertising through community. "One reason why sales can run to such large figures," observed Frederic Melcher of the religious book business, "is because the man or woman who becomes interested in a book feels instinctively that it is his or her duty to urge its reading on another. . . ."[39] As another commenter explained, "A reader who has enjoyed a good novel may recommend it in a friendly way, but the reader of a book that has moved him in his innermost soul feels it his duty and privilege to get others to read."[40] The promotion of religious reading fostered

[38] Quoted in "Religious Book Week," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 26, 1921, 620.
[39] Frederic G. Melcher, "Religious Books and Their Readers," *The New York Times Book Review*, March 20, 1921, 8.
[40] "Religious Books as Bestsellers," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 19, 1921, 513.

the development of textually defined communities, communities of those reading the same books at the same time, and it also depended on those virtual communities for further sales.

Consumer values co-existed with community and spiritual values at all levels of Religious Book Week. A bookseller "in the west" reported back to the Religious Book Week Committee that the campaign "really put his store on the map" while another strictly religious bookstore claimed "that the first days of Religious Book Week were like Christmas shopping days."[41] The Chicago Booksellers' League, recognizing the potential for such commercial gains, sent a Religious Book Week mailing to all the clergy in the city, made announcements at meetings of local ministers, and provided copy for stories about the campaign to local newspapers. Many book week boosters, in fact, drew direct comparisons between the buying of books and the buying of other goods, for, as the YMCA noted in its book week leaflet, "the publishers and the distributors of books have felt that there was no good reason why people should not buy books for themselves and their friends as frequently as they now buy less desirable things."[42] An advertisement in the March 1921 issue of *Newsabout*—its special religious books issue—asked rather pointedly, "What shall it be on Easter morning? Handkerchiefs? Candy? Flowers? It is up to YOU to make it BOOKS."[43]

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[41] "Religious Book Week and After," *Publishers' Weekly*, April 2, 1921, 1048.
[42] YMCA leaflet, quoted in "Religious Book Week Finds Wide Support," *Publishers' Weekly*, March 12, 1921, 778.
[43] As quoted in "Religious Book Week Finds Wide Support," *Publishers' Weekly*, March 12, 1921, 778.

The references to Christmas and Easter shopping remind us that commercialism and religious piety had by the 1920s a long shared history in the United States.[44] The Religious Book Week campaign certainly capitalized on this history of "selling God," yet endeavored, at the same time, to redeem it. Jesus may have driven the moneychangers from the temple in Jerusalem, but the organizers of Religious Book Week sought not to expel but to convert them. Numerous churches reported cooperative ventures with local bookstores, allowing booksellers to establish displays in the church during Religious Book Week. Such arrangements did not offend, apparently, because the commercialism here served sacred ends. William H. Wooster of the Fleming H. Revell Co., the leading nondenominational religious publisher in the nation, expressed his version of redeemed consumerism when he wrote in support of the book week. "If all young married couples could realize how much their future happiness actually depends upon *creating the right religious atmosphere about their home* from the start," he remarked, "I am sure a number of religious books would be installed along with their very first furnishings from the start."[45] Dr. W. J. Smith, manager of the American Baptist Publication Society's bookstore in Kansas City, also noted that commercial success in the selling of religious books might serve higher ends. "I am sending out letters to all the pastors in my territory soliciting

[44] The literature here is extensive. See John M. Giggie and Diane Winston, eds., *Faith in the Market: Religion and the Rise of Urban Commercial Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Penne Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).
[45] William H. Wooster, writing in *New Era Magazine*, March 1921, as quoted in "Religious Book Week Finds Wide Support," *Publishers' Weekly*, March 12, 1921, 778. Italics original.

their co-operation in the Religious Book Week," he declared, because "the right kind of advertising"—meaning advertising from preachers and Sunday school teachers—"is the gateway to a successful book business." Commercial success in selling religious books, according to Smith, served both God and Mammon. "It will not only mean the sale of books, but it will help to make the world safe for democracy," he proclaimed. "While doing this, we are advertising our store and will, no doubt, get in touch with many prospective customers."[46] Redeeming consumerism, for family, God, and nation, allowed booksellers like Smith to earn a living while serving the faith.

Religious Book Week may not have done much to fulfill Woodrow Wilson's vision of a world made safe for democracy, but William Jennings Bryan, formerly Wilson's Secretary of State, lent his celebratory endorsement to the crusade. The committee managed to secure an additional letter of support from Harry Emerson Fosdick, enabling the promoters to announce with pride that the first Religious Book Week was endorsed by the leading voices of conservative and liberal Protestantism.[47] Indeed, given the intense ideological clashes in American Protestantism in the early 1920s, the Religious Book Week Committee achieved a remarkable feat by enlisting these two giants in a joint endeavor. Fosdick delivered his no-holds-barred "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"

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[46] Dr. W. J. Smith, "A Progressive Religious Book Store," *Publishers' Weekly*, March 12, 1921, 777.

[47] The book week publicists transcribed Bryan's rather staid proclamation, "The spiritual nature needs nourishment no less than the body, and religious books supplement the Bible, the Church, and the Sunday School," onto small cards for display in store windows, and included Fosdick's call for "more who make it a duty to acquaint themselves with the great dynamic literature of spiritual life" in additional publicity materials. Quoted in Melcher, "Religious Books and Their Readers," *The New York Times Book Review*, March 20, 1921, 8.

sermon from his pulpit in New York's historic First Presbyterian Church in May 1922, only a year later, and quickly thereafter he and Bryan began their fierce ideological struggle, one of the flashpoints of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy.[48] The two debated evolution in the pages of *The New York Times*, and Bryan, calling Fosdick "the most altitudinous higher critic," whose liberal theology simply deadened the "pain while the Christian religion is being removed," eventually succeeded in driving Fosdick from his Presbyterian pulpit in 1925.[49] Fosdick's departure ultimately led to his founding of the Riverside Church, with the backing of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., while Bryan's continued harangues against evolution and liberalism led to his humiliation in 1925 in the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee—but each man, on the eve of this great conflict, nevertheless lent his support to Religious Book Week.

Religious Book Week: Beyond "Sectarian Propaganda"

The simultaneous endorsements of Bryan and Fosdick point to the very heart of the Religious Book Week agenda. While the organizers clearly designed Religious Book Week as a marketing campaign to boost sales, they also understood that better sales went hand-in-hand with a larger religious ambition: to define and unify a spiritual center in a

[48] Michael Kazin, Bryan's most recent biographer, makes a compelling case that Bryan himself was not a fundamentalist, strictly speaking. Bryan, according to Kazin, agreed in many respects with fundamentalist theology, but Bryan's primary concerns were pragmatic—the personal and social benefits of traditional Christianity—rather than narrowly theological. See Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 262-295. Kazin makes no mention of Bryan's small role in Religious Book Week.

[49] Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 119.

divided and diversifying country. Promoters regularly denounced "sectarian propaganda," and in numerous speeches, editorials, and essays called upon publishers and booksellers to embrace the wider possibilities of faith. This was not a new refrain; liberals for decades had sought to strip Christianity to its essential core, and thus liberate it from sectarian captivity. The same can be said of many religious movements, of course, such as the Disciples of Christ in the nineteenth century and the fundamentalists of the early twentieth, who saw their movements as returns to the essences of Christianity. Religious liberals, however, located the essence of Christianity not in a return to the past but in an embrace of the present.

The characteristic principles of Protestant liberalism—optimism regarding human nature, emphasis on moral education and ethical teachings, and an overarching faith in human progress—led modern liberals to pursue human unity beyond creed or sect, and to believe in its possibility. Advocates of "muscular Christianity" had decried the "et cetera of creed," prompting historian Stephen Prothero to characterize muscular Christians as thinking "doctrine was for sissies."[50] Fosdick himself most vigorously championed the cause of a faith liberated from narrow doctrinal strife. In "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" he lamented the "shame that the Christian Church should be quarreling over little matters when the world is dying of great needs." "What can you do with folks," he asked, "who, in the face of colossal issues, play with the tiddledywinks and

[50] Prothero, *American Jesus*, 93.

peccadillos of religion?"[51] Religious Book Week married this expansive notion of religion with the tools of mass culture—the mass media of print and a consumerism stoked by sophisticated advertising campaigns—enabling its liberal Protestant organizers to use middlebrow literary culture to evangelize middle-class readers. The agenda to move beyond creeds—itself a sectarian position of liberal Protestantism—shaped the spiritual focus of middlebrow reading for decades to come.

In its second year, the organizing committee of Religious Book Week, still under the leadership of Frederic Melcher, a committed Unitarian layman, added Arthur Kenedy of P. J. Kenedy and Sons, the nation's oldest Catholic publishing house, and Charles E. Bloch of The Jewish Book Concern, to the previous group of Protestant bookmen. The committee now boasted of "the breadth of the plan," a remarkable achievement, they believed, because "all types of religious houses—Evangelical, Catholic, Jewish, Liberal—were . . . included, using the same program and putting the same thought forward co-operatively."[52] The Religious Book Week Committee also gathered statements on the importance of religious reading from a wide range of church and synagogue leaders, to be used in promotional materials and to be made available to local newspapers across the country. To Fosdick's statement "A Man and His Reading," the committee added statements from William Barton, a leading Congregationalist minister and father of Bruce Barton; Russell Conwell, renowned evangelical orator, first president

[51] Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" *Christian Work* 102 (June 10, 1922): 722. Also quoted, in shorter form, in Prothero, *American Jesus*, 111.
[52] "Second Annual Religious Book Week, April 2-8," *Publishers' Weekly*, March 18, 1922, 842.

of Temple University and author of the famed "An Acre of Diamonds" sermon and book; Rabbi Maurice Harris of Temple Israel, New York; and Charles W. Eliot, President Emeritus of Harvard, the most celebrated reading promoter of the era.[53]

Each of these men, in his endorsement, echoed the central claim of Religious Book Week—good religious books must transcend the narrow, sectarian concerns that tarnish the public's impression of religion, and speak plainly to higher, universal truths. In order to counter the "feeling that religious books were for a few devoted church-goers," as *Publishers' Weekly* later described the problem, advocates of Religious Book Week frequently stressed the widest possible scope for religious reading.[54] Charles Eliot, in his statement of support, stressed the importance of cooperation between religious and secular publishing houses, while another endorser added that public libraries might join the cause "so long as the religious teaching is in no sense sectarian."[55] To these voices of inclusiveness Rabbi Harris added his call for religious leaders to direct "the reading of the age into the right channels in a way to stimulate the noblest aspirations."[56]

Over and over in the early years of Religious Book Week, commentators remarked on the role of books in expanding religious possibilities. "Each year," book week organizers declared in 1924, "when the discussion of religious books comes to the

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[53] Dr. Eliot had famously introduced his "Five-Foot Shelf of Books," also called the "Harvard Classics," in 1909 as perhaps the first middlebrow reading program in the nation. See Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 27-29.
[54] "The Field of the Religious Book," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 23, 1924, 591.
[55] Charles W. Eliot, "Books to Help Give Cheerful Beliefs," and Raymond Calkins, "Devotional Reading," reprinted in *Publishers' Weekly*, March 18, 1922, 848-849.
[56] Maurice H. Harris, "Religious Literature for a Secular Age," reprinted in *Publishers' Weekly*, March 18, 1922, 849.

front there is increasing evidence of the broadening definition of what is a religious book."[57] Some tied this enlarged spirituality to commercial success; since "those [books] which have the widest sale are usually of undenominational and general character," increased sales meant overcoming the "strong prejudice against the word 'religious,'" by working "to broaden the understanding of the public as to what a religious book means."[58] But just as frequently, the impulse transcended economic interest alone. Henry F. Cope of the Religious Education Association declared in 1921 that the Great War "projected at a common focus life's naked realities and its profoundest speculations." Out of this "hour of supreme crisis" arose "a literature of religion that has become popular . . . because it simply faced life." The new religious literature had captured the attention of so many readers, Cope declared, "by meeting our needs as beings who live seven days a week, rather than only one and, also, as beings who on all these seven days have infinitely deep hungers and infinitely high longings."[59]

Efforts to describe this broadened sense of religious possibilities came not only from publishers or religious leaders, but from a wide array of sources. Harold Hunting, a bookstore manager, echoed the notion that increased sales required rethinking the meaning of "religious." A "much more broad and liberal definition of a religious book is called for," he declared, if booksellers hoped to turn Religious Book Week publicity into profit. Hunting proposed, in a paraphrase of William James, that "a man's religion is his

[57] "What Is a Religious Book," *Publishers' Weekly*, March 29, 1924, 1107.
[58] "The Output of Religious Books," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 17, 1923, 501.
[59] Henry F. Cope, "The Currency of Religious Books," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 19, 1921, 519.

idealization of what he cares most for" and that, therefore, "a religious book is one which helps us to get the really best out of any of the concrete interests of life." Books of technical theology, commentaries, and sermon outlines might interest clergy, but booksellers must understand that "Religion is not confined to church people. It sometimes seems that there is as much religion outside the churches as in them." The "man in the street," Hunting declared, is not moved by "sectarian propaganda" but by broad-minded books that aid in the living of life.[60] An editorial writer in the Rock Island, Illinois, *Argus*, agreed, claiming that the focus of Religious Book Week must be on "modern religious books that discuss the practical problems of every day life." This writer argued, "a religious book is any book that turns the light of truth inward on the problems of human life and inspires men to follow the higher rather than the lower choices." Such books, modern religious books that speak to modern readers' needs, are books "the public can read . . . without being bored."[61]

The notion of avoiding boredom was not, perhaps, the loftiest of aspirations, but it brought together the twin aspects of Religious Book Week—providing relevant spiritual sustenance, and doing so in an appealing consumer package. Indeed, for all the elevated rhetoric about the intellectual, social, and spiritual contributions made by good religious books, the book week organizers recognized that their agenda of defining a spiritual center still required salesmanship. As Religious Book Week matured beyond its first year, Melcher and the rest of the committee carried this agenda for religious reading and

[60] Harold Hunting, "What is a Religious Book?" *Publishers' Weekly*, March 18, 1922, 843.
[61] "What Is a Religious Book?" editorial in Rock Island *Argus*, April 1, 1922, reprinted in *Publishers' Weekly,* February 17, 1923, 512.

national spiritual revitalization forward with an increasingly aggressive, sophisticated, and comprehensive marketing strategy. The committee more than doubled its publicity budget in 1922 to $4,000, and Melcher, ever the innovator, made an appearance from the Westinghouse radio station in Newark, New Jersey—a station whose signal carried well over one thousand miles at the time—to speak on the campaign's 1922 theme, "Great Books Are Life Teachers." "Melcher's speech," according to publishing historian John Tebbel, "was the first use of radio for general book promotion."[62] The book week promotional campaign also made available in 1923 promotional slides for use in a "motion picture theater, or in [a] church, club or library motion picture projector or projectoscope" and moved more aggressively to woo general trade book stores, winning conspicuous support from the book departments at Macy's and Wannamaker's.[63]

The Religious Book Week organizers also reached out to the burgeoning film industry, indicating a clear effort to embrace rather than shun the medium many feared would bring the demise of reading. The book week committee secured from the National Committee for Better Films a list of "religious book films"—films based on popular religious texts—that booksellers and churches might use to spur interest in religious literature. The National Committee, founded in 1916, was affiliated with the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, an organization of concerned citizens dedicated to

[62] John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States, Vol. III: The Golden Age Between Two Wars, 1920-1940* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1978), 331.
[63] "Suggestions for Booksellers for Religious Book Week," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 17, 1923, 511.

educating the public about controversial films.[64] The films recommended were all non-commercial, though the National Committee advised that churches without projection equipment "co-operate with some theater in their exhibition . . . urging the congregation to attend." The list included a fifty-two-reel collection of *The Holy Bible in Motion Pictures*, in addition to movies of special interest to Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Among the recommended movies were *Methodized Cannibals*, a film on Methodist missions in the South Pacific, *God and the Man*, based on a fictional treatment of early Methodism, *Pilgrimage to Lourdes* and *Belgian Sisters of Luzon*, and *The Wandering Jew*, a life of Theodore Herzl. All the films listed were chosen to "fit in particularly with Religious Book Week showings" because "they will undoubtedly revive interest in religious books on kindred subjects."[65] Though radio, department store, and film promotions represented important innovations in the advertising of books, careful coordination with libraries, Sunday schools, and churches nevertheless remained the central focus of the campaign.

[64] The National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, founded in 1909 by a group of fourteen social workers, educators, and religious professionals, was originally called the New York Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, later changing its name to the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, and in 1916 to the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures. These changes reflected its growing national ambitions and it move away from censorship and toward viewer education as the best means for dealing with controversial material in film. The National Committee for Better Films was established as part of this shift away from censorship and toward the promotion of what it considered positive films.

[65] "Motion Pictures for Religious Book Week," *Library Journal* 48, no. 4 (February 15, 1923): 173.

Ultimately, according to the committee's own "Suggestions for Booksellers," "10,000 ministers talking about books are the most valuable allies that bookstores can win."[66]

Religious Book Week: The Visual Construction of Modern Religious Reading

As pioneering as radio and film tie-ins were in the 1920s, the most important book week marketing medium was, certainly, the posters produced annually and distributed by the tens of thousands to churches, public libraries, bookstores, YMCA branches, denominational offices, and other religious organizations around the country. These posters became the public face of Religious Book Week. The best of them were not only visually compelling, but also communicated with clarity and simplicity the book promoters' vision of religious reading, informing pastors, Sunday school teachers, booksellers, and readers themselves why proper reading mattered, and how books furthered well-ordered families and society. Indeed, the Religious Book Week posters embodied, more clearly than any other artifact of the campaign, the tensions at the heart of Religious Book Week, and religious middlebrow culture more broadly, in the 1920s. The posters themselves were products of modern advertising, often designed by leading practitioners of the graphic arts, yet they visually evoked nostalgia for nineteenth-century genteel and evangelical ideologies of reading. The liberal religious mission at the heart of Religious Book Week—to promote a tolerant, practical, and modern spirituality transcending sect and tradition—stood side-by-side in these posters with references to an

[66] "Suggestions for Booksellers for Religious Book Week," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 17, 1923, 511.

earlier America, one centered on home and family. While serving as guides for twentieth-century consumers, these posters harkened back to nineteenth-century producer values—especially the critical notion of character—before advertising and the ethic of consumption had so radically altered the cultural landscape. In keeping with their focus on character as a core value, the Religious Book Week posters also reveal the organizers' concerns about male, clerical authority in an age increasingly defined by mass culture.

The mass-produced poster as a medium arose in the milieu of modern advertising in the late nineteenth century, and achieved a further degree of cultural currency as a nearly ubiquitous tool of government propaganda during the Great War. Technological advances in the 1880s and 1890s—especially in color lithography—enhanced the mechanical possibilities of postermaking, while talented artists such as Edward Penfield and Will Bradley in the United States, and even more famously Jules Cheret and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec in France, brought aesthetic refinement, unique styles, and unprecedented cachet to poster design.[67] In the early years of the twentieth-century "the advertising poster was widely regarded as an exciting new art form," inspiring many businessmen to anticipate that "good posters would oil the machinery of economic progress" through "the harmonious conjunction of art and commerce."[68] American publishing houses became some of the earliest and most enthusiastic patrons of poster advertising, such that "elite-sector national publishing was largely responsible for the

[67] See Alain Weill, *The Poster: A Worldwide Survey and History* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1985), 72-80; and Michele H. Bogart, *Advertising, Artists, and the Borders of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 79-124.
[68] Bogart, *Advertising, Artists, and the Borders of Art*, 79.

emergence of the commercial fine art poster" in the United States.[69] The high profile given to poster artists during the war, through the government's Division of Pictorial Publicity, and the increasingly important role of advertising in the American economy after the war made the 1920s a heyday of poster art. "During the 1920s," art historian Michele Bogart observes, "advertising art directors moved, relatively successfully, to make the circles of art and advertising intersect" so that art for commercial purposes achieved an unprecedented level of cultural legitimacy in this critical decade in the history of American consumer culture.[70]

Frederic Melcher, not surprisingly, played a leading role in bringing top-flight poster artists to the promotion of religious books.[71] In addition to the innovations he introduced with Children's Book Week, the Newbery and Caldecott Awards, and radio book promotion, Melcher also showed a keen interest in the application of the graphic arts to the selling of books. He served as president of the American Institute of Graphic Arts from 1927-1928, at a time when book jacket design, like so much else in publishing in the 1920s, transitioned from practices reflective of older book culture values to new methods that applied modern business sensibilities; in the case of dust jackets, this meant

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[69] Bogart, *Advertising, Artists, and the Borders of Art*, 82.
[70] Bogart, *Advertising, Artists, and the Borders of Art*, 4.
[71] Melcher was a champion of the graphic arts and, in his role with the National Association of Book Publishers, and chairman of Children's Book Week and Religious Book Week, acted as patron, commissioning posters for promotional purposes. The artist responsible for the introduction of the book poster in the 1910s, however, was Michael Gross, who would later design a poster for the 1940s version of Religious Book Week (discussed in Chapter 4). Gross was widely acknowledged as the greatest innovator in book merchandising in the twentieth century. See "Take A Bow: Michael Gross," *Publishers' Weekly*, December 30, 1963, 23-28.

the gradual replacement of plain, utilitarian dust jackets with more ornate designs, signaling the book's status as a commercial good competing in a business marketplace as well as a cultural object embodying non-commercial values.[72] In this new business climate, the Religious Book Week Committee, led by Melcher, understood from the beginning the importance of image-making to a successful marketing campaign, and with the first book week commissioned a poster as a critical component of its public communication strategy. By the middle of the 1920s, these posters came from some of the most celebrated poster artists in the country.

The Religious Book Week campaign produced four posters from 1921 to 1927, and though the designs changed considerably, each poster framed the reading of religious books as a counter to what Lippmann would call "the acids of modernity," as an activity to preserve timeless American values in a rapidly changing society. The 1921 image, for example, depicts two men, one a wanderer, overburdened, stooped, and perhaps lost, while another man, dressed as a Puritan, points forward, evidently guiding the wanderer on his way (Figure 1.1). The Puritan gestures toward an unseen horizon, but also, in the composition of the image, toward a shelf of books and a lit torch, symbol of truth. Under the heading "Religious Book Week" appears the caption, "More Books for the Home," the slogan of the 1921 campaign. Though perhaps somewhat confused rhetorically—devoid of women, children, or an interior domestic space, the image fails to reinforce visually the theme of books in the home—this poster nevertheless clearly communicates

[72] Turner, *Marketing Modernism*, 65.

that religious books might serve as guides to troubled moderns, wandering, as Lippmann wrote, "in trackless space under a blinding sun."

The 1922 poster also evoked the values of a bygone time, as a father reads to his family in the parlor of their home (Figure 1.2). His wife sits across from him, contentedly holding their daughter, while their son eagerly peers over the father's shoulder, reading along. A Bible rests on the side table—a mere prop? just set aside?—as the family happily reads together this other "good book." The scene might well be one of small-town family life, except the family's upper-class attire and fine furnishings—and most tellingly, the skyscrapers visible through the window behind—indicate that this is a modern, urban, sophisticated family. By engaging in the simple act of reading together, this urbane family avoids the disorientation of less well-grounded moderns. Furthermore, for all the evident wealth of the family this poster portrays, it, like all the Religious Book Week posters, avoids endorsing overt commercialism. While the 1919 poster for Children's Book Week (Figure 1.3) showed two children captivated by a room overflowing with books—and the insistent demand "More Books In The Home!"—the Religious Book Week poster features only a modest collection, and the action clearly centers on the careful reading of the single open text, in accordance with traditional prescriptions for proper religious reading. The caption, the theme of the 1922 campaign, "Good Books Are Life Teachers," underscores the value of reading not for pleasure but for moral uplift.

Combating the emptiness of modern consumer culture was indeed a central thrust of Religious Book Week, but in place of modern mass culture religious liberals proposed not a return to nineteenth-century evangelicalism, but a revitalized and modernized faith.

To that end, the visual rhetoric of each of the Religious Book Week posters spoke of the twin emphases on vigorous masculinity and nonsectarian spirituality. Each poster symbolically represented male authority as central to the project of redeeming modern life. The posters perfectly captured the contrast between an outdated emphasis on doctrine, which "was for sissies," and the broadened, liberalized, nonsectarian religion promoted by the Religious Book Week, which was, according to boosters, strikingly masculine.

The visual rhetoric of the posters, in this regard, simply crystallized the verbal rhetoric of book week promoters, who throughout the 1920s wrote often about the nexus of modern spirituality and renewed masculinity. This rhetoric was an act of salesmanship to be sure, an effort to attract male readers and thereby provide greater legitimacy to the broadened faith of the imagined spiritual center. Henry Cope, the educator and book week supporter, vigorously championed masculine modernism in religion. He declared, "The man who reads in his library or on the train a religious book is a new type of man." Whether highly educated or not, this new man lives a "life full of immensely widened interests and intelligence. His mind is no longer parochial; it roves the whole world." The "new woman" may have attracted more attention in the 1920s, but Cope saw the "new man" as critical to the program for religious books. Alongside this new book reader, Cope proclaimed,

> The man who writes the religious books is likewise a broader man. If he is a minister he has shared his educational experiences with his audience; they all went to the same or similar schools. The fact that he was destined for a religious profession did not prevent his making good on a ball team. And now he mingles with the crowd; he belongs to their clubs, plays their games and knows their life at

> first hand. His kind of book gets into their hands because their kind of books have come into his life.[73]

It took a man's man, athletic, sociable, confident and worldly, according to Cope, to write religious books in the modern world, books that might appeal to "the new type of man" striving ahead in America's bustling cities. As another book week editorial announced more succinctly, "The modern religious book is a very virile piece of literature."[74]

Evidence from the Cheney report indicates this talk of virile literature was no bluster. Though women outnumbered men by two-to-one in the pews, the Cheney team found in 1930 that among readers who identified as religious, men devoted 48 percent of their reading to religious books, while women devoted only 31 percent. The discrepancy, the Cheney team concluded, was not due to "vocational interest in the men"—clergy doing their homework, in other words—but to the "forceful machinery for religious book distribution."[75] The efforts to promote religious books as virile, according to the Cheney Survey anyway, evidently worked.

The Religious Book Week poster first introduced in 1923 powerfully depicts this relationship between modern religious literature and virility. This poster featured a close-up portrait of a robust Abraham Lincoln (Figure 1.4). As with previous posters, the 1923 design lacked any religious symbols that might reveal allegiance to a particular sect or doctrine; the books it promoted were as modern as its design. The poster simply

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[73] Henry F. Cope, "The Currency of Religious Books," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 21, 1921, 519.
[74] "What Is a Religious Book?" editorial in Rock Island *Argus*, April 1, 1922, reprinted in *Publishers' Weekly*, February 17, 1923, 512.
[75] Cheney, *Economic Survey of the Book Industry*, 79.

announces "Religious Book Week," and, along the bottom, the annual theme, "Good Books Build Character." The poster's designer, Charles Buckles "C. B." Falls, was one of the preeminent poster artists in America. Falls had designed the poster with the largest circulation in history, a 1918 propaganda poster encouraging donations of books "for men in camp and 'over there'" (Figure 1.5).[76] Born in Indiana, Falls found work in newspaper and book illustration in Chicago and New York before achieving international acclaim with the success of his poster designs during the war. He completed his wartime "Books Wanted" poster in a single weekend under deadline, and its popularity solicited "more books for our armed forces than the training camps could house."[77] With the Abraham Lincoln poster for Religious Book Week, Falls employed his considerable skill and experience to render graphically the liberal religious agenda for reading.

The Religious Book Week Committee reissued the Falls poster for each of the campaigns from 1923 through 1926. The most striking feature of the design is the overt masculinity of the Lincoln image. This is the rail-splitter Lincoln, not the gaunt, haggard, war-weary president. Recruiting posters from the war had frequently appealed to men's sexual identity to encourage enlistment (Figures 1.6 and 1.7), and Falls himself had crafted sexually charged images in his own wartime propaganda work (Figures 1.8). With his portrait of Lincoln for Religious Book Week, Falls here too devised an image with a strongly gendered visual rhetoric. The central ambitions of Religious Book Week,

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[76] On the role of libraries in World War I, see Wayne A. Wiegand, *"An Active Instrument for Propaganda": The American Public Library During World War I* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989)

[77] Norman Kent, "C. B. Falls, 1874-1960: A Career in Retrospect," *American Artist* 26 (February 1962): 41, 62.

increased book sales and reasserted cultural authority for Protestant elites, required a modernized faith stripped clean of doctrinal adornment, a faith that was practical and manly. In Abraham Lincoln—American everyman and martyred savior of the nation, unchurched frontiersman yet profoundly religious, author of American scripture in his great addresses at Gettysburg and the Second Inaugural—in this first among American men Falls found the perfect symbol for the aspirations of Religious Book Week promoters. The spirit of Lincoln was the spirit of virile modern religion.

In 1927 the final Religious Book Week poster appeared, Adolph Treidler's rendition of a Gothic cathedral interior (Figure 1.9). Treidler's image carried a slogan, "Religious Books Build Character," only slightly modified from the "Good Books Build Character" theme that book week promoters had used since the Lincoln poster was first introduced in 1923.[78] Treidler, like C. B. Falls, was a highly regarded illustrator when he received the book week commission, having studied at the California School of Design and with Robert Henri in New York. He worked for many of the leading mass-circulation magazines of the early twentieth century, and achieved wide recognition for his poster designs for cruise ship lines.[79] *Publishers' Weekly* proclaimed his design for Religious Book Week "masterful," and his was indeed the most consistently praised of the promotional posters. Treidler's Gothic interior recalls the nostalgia for medieval order

[78] The Treidler poster remained in use after the conclusion of Religious Book Week in 1927, which explains the lack of a "Religious Book Week" heading. With the phrase "Religious Book Week" gone, the publishers association opted to change the slogan "Good Books Build Character" to the more explicit "Religious Books Build Character."
[79] Walt and Roger Reed, *The American Illustrator, 1880-1980* (New York: Madison Square Press, 1984), 110.

associated with Henry Adams and other turn-of-the-century American antimodernists, and like Falls's symbolically rich invocation of Lincoln, Treidler seemed to assert that the book week's emphasis on building character required a turning back to bygone times.[80]

Cultural historians have written at great length on the significance of the notion of character in American cultural history, particularly as a marker that tracks shifting middle-class notions of the self. Most often, this idea is expressed as a tension or shift between a "character" ethic of the nineteenth century and a twentieth-century ethic of "personality." Historian Warren I. Susman, building on earlier social criticism from David Riesman and Philip Rieff, offered the basic interpretive framework for decoding the significance of these critical terms.[81] Susman argued that the United States experienced a transition from a nineteenth-century culture of character, rooted in material austerity and a production-driven economy, to a twentieth-century culture of personality, tied to material abundance and a consumer-driven economy. Critical to the culture of character, according to Susman, were notions of duty, work, building, honor, reputation, morals, and manhood; the twentieth-century culture of personality, in contrast, described itself with adjectives, not nouns, including terms such as magnetic, masterful, creative, dominant, and glowing. In Susman's characterization, the major shift

[80] On Henry Adams and the vogue in medievalism in turn-of-the-century American culture, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 142-181, 262-297.

[81] Warren I. Susman, "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture," in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 271-285.

between these two "visions of the self" occurred between 1900 and 1920, though neither seamlessly nor completely.

The slogans "Good Book Build Character" and "Religious Books Build Character," visually rendered with Falls's Lincoln and Treidler's Gothic cathedral, signified liberal Protestantism's simultaneous embrace of twentieth-century consumerism and its efforts to combat the spiritual corrosiveness of modernity. Lincoln and the medieval church each symbolized a unifying male authority structure, transcending schisms, factions, parties, and doctrines. The notion of character offered to confused moderns the same unifying center, a single integrated self, not the fractured and phony series of selves marketed as "personality." The editors of *The Baptist*, in their March 1921 Religious Book Week issue, stressed the role of books in shaping character. "Character is formed by the image one holds in his mind," they pronounced. "Whenever the story of any great man is told, there is certain to be mention of a few books which helped to shape his character. It makes a difference what is read."[82] The posters of Lincoln and the Gothic church reminded readers, in similar fashion, of the role of "good books" in sustaining the values of an earlier America in a rapidly modernizing society.

Religious Book Week, however, was itself a marketing campaign, a creature of twentieth-century consumer culture, and so found itself in the paradoxical position of marketing character. This paradox, according to historian Richard Fox, permeated liberal Protestantism, which "helped produce a twentieth-century consumer culture which knew no transcendent sources of value or judgment, yet . . . helped preserve an

[82] "When Did You Buy a Book?," *The Baptist*, March 5, 1921, 133.

older producer culture that saw human responsibility as the cultivation of character in self-sacrificial service."[83] Perhaps most tellingly, neither of these posters, designed to help bookstores sell books, featured a book itself, revealing the deep ambivalence of these publishers and churchmen to the very consumer culture they also embraced. Religious Book Week embodied the ambiguities of liberal Protestantism itself, ambiguities on full visual display in the posters of Falls and Treidler.

CONCLUSION

Frederic Melcher and the National Association of Publishers made the decision, in 1928, to move on from a specific Religious Book Week to other promotional strategies, declaring the book week concept "having served its purpose."[84] The editor of *Church Management* magazine seemed to agree. "Sectionalism among religious books is passing," he declared in 1929. "I refer to the old sectionalism based on geographic and denominational lines. . . . For the first time a religious writer has a nation-wide constituency."[85] Division within American Protestantism was far from over, of course, but the late 1920s was indeed a time of great hope for writers and publishers of modern religious books. "At the heart of Religious Book Week," writes Joan Shelly Rubin, "was a confident assertion of the expanding American readership for volumes on religion, together with a recognition of waning denominational allegiance among mainline

[83] Richard Wightman Fox, "The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism, 1875-1925," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1993): 639-640.
[84] "The Religious Book Season," *Publishers' Weekly,* February 18, 1928, 666.
[85] William H. Leach, "Religious Books Do Move," *Publishers' Weekly,* February 16, 1929, 757.

Protestants." Religious Book Week and other "book-marketing strategies," she notes, "were an index of the cosmopolitanism by which liberal Protestants sought to define themselves in the early twentieth century."[86] Religious Book Week aimed to unite the promotion of religious books into a single, coordinated, national campaign, with the full resources of the New York publishing world devoted to broadcasting a simple message about modern books and a modernized faith. By the late 1920s, it seemed to those in charge, they had succeeded.

With the conclusion of Religious Book Week, in fact, religious books received, if anything, greater promotional attention, as the NAPB declared the entire six weeks before Easter "Religious Book Season." The publishers' association marketed books more aggressively than ever to churches, sending one hundred thousand copies of their book circular to congregations and denominations across the country in 1928. In addition, noted *Publishers' Weekly*, "the famous Treidler poster is being given wider distribution, and with it can be supplied to any bookseller the famous Lincoln poster, so suitable for books of this character."[87] As Religious Book Week expanded into Religious Book Season, the cosmopolitan religion of liberal Protestantism seemed to have rebounded from its postwar doldrums. Faced with waning influence and spiritual malaise, publishers and church leaders had responded by marketing a practical, virile, and modern faith. In the process, they established the beginnings of a religious

[86] Joan Shelley Rubin, "The Boundaries of American Religious Publishing in the Early Twentieth Century," *Book History* 2, no. 1 (1999): 211-212.
[87] "The Religious Book Season," *Publishers' Weekly,* February 18, 1928, 666.

middlebrow culture that shaped reading choices, and middle-class spirituality, in the decades to come.

Chapter 2: The Religious Book Club: Middlebrow Culture and Liberal Protestant Seeker Spirituality

Religious Book Week brought modern religious literature to the attention of the nation, or at least to that significant portion of the middle class who read newspapers, frequented libraries and bookstores, and attended churches affiliated with the largest Protestant denominations. But a wide-scale effort such as this, for all its promise, also created significant problems. For the consumer, promotion on this scale posed the question of choice. In a vast marketplace, full of an ever-growing array of options, each compellingly presented and readily available, how was a reader to decide what to read? And who, if anyone, could help one choose? This overwhelming profusion of new books and new ideas, occurring in all fields of learning in the 1920s, both frightened and delighted Americans. "The growth of such new knowledge appeared to be a cause of great rejoicing," writes Warren Susman, yet many simultaneously wondered "whether mass education and mass communication will allow any civilization to survive."[1] Was America on the verge of a golden age of understanding, of mastery of nature, self, and society in ways the world had never seen, or more ominously embarking on a path toward cultural chaos? American Protestants had since the early nineteenth century entertained millennial hopes regarding the printed word. Was the millennium at hand, or simply a babble of confusion?

[1] Warren I. Susman, "Culture and Civilization: The Nineteen-Twenties," in *Culture As History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), 107.

In response to these urgent questions—questions vexing both religious and secular culture—an industry of cultural expertise arose in the 1920s. This "spectacular eruption of highly popular efforts to popularize knowledge" included a vogue in outlines—summaries of an entire field of learning, often from acclaimed writers like H. G. Wells—which Joan Shelley Rubin considers "the interwar period's most important nonfiction publishing trend."[2] Will and Ariel Durant's *The Story of Philosophy* (1927) and, more famously, *The Story of Civilization* series (first published in 1935) became the most celebrated such books in American history. Readers new to such challenging texts might turn to how-to books, including Ezra Pound's *How to Read* (1931) or Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren's seminal *How to Read a Book* (1940), which proclaimed "the more active the reading the better."[3] Alder and Van Doren offered guidance on "How to Read Practical Books," "How to Read History," "How to Read Science and Mathematics," and "How to Read Philosophy." Other enduring institutions of this emerging culture included *Reader's Digest*, founded in 1922, and the Book-of-the-Month Club, established in 1926, each of which guided readers through the confusion of reading possibilities with expertly chosen texts.[4] These outlets offered readers engagement with the serious and vital ideas of the day, in forms that were reliable, affordable, and understandable. In

[2] Susman, "Culture and Civilization," 108; Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 209.
[3] Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 5.
[4] John Heidenry, *Theirs Was the Kingdom: Lila and DeWitt Wallace and the Story of the Reader's Digest* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993); Joanne P. Sharp, *Condensing the Cold War: Reader's Digest and American Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

1927, to meet these same needs for expert advice in the confusion of mass culture, the Religious Book Club opened. The Religious Book Club, like its model, the Book-of-the-Month Club, facilitated sampling—and buying—within the constraints of the club, among books chosen by experts, always with editorial guidance about what to read and how.

RELIGION AND MIDDLEBROW CULTURE

The term used in the 1920s, and still used today by scholars and critics, to describe this culture of outlines, readings programs, and book clubs was "middlebrow." Borrowing from phrenological pseudo-science, critics by the 1880s began to use "highbrow" as a term of cultural distinction, and by 1900 or so "lowbrow" came into usage as the opposite, to denote lack of cultivation. By the 1920s, middle-class Americans regularly fretted over their place in this pecking order; a publisher's advertisement in a 1922 issue of *The New Republic*, for example, playing on these fears, wondered worriedly, "Are We a Nation of Low Brows?"[5] By the 1920s a middle ground, the middlebrow, had also emerged, quickly to be engulfed in controversy.[6] Virginia Woolf, in *The Death of the Moth*, derided the middlebrow person as devoted to "no single object, neither art itself nor

[5] Catherine Turner, *Marketing Modernism between the Two World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 28-29.

[6] Trysh Travis describes the middlebrow controversy at length in "Print and the Creation of Middlebrow," in Scott E. Casper, Joanne D. Chaison, and Jeffrey D. Groves, eds., *Perspectives on American Book History: Artifacts and Commentary* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 339-366. For a further useful discussion of middlebrow, especially in popular magazines such as *Readers' Digest* and *Saturday Review of Literature*, see Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 61-99.

life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, and prestige."[7] Withering attacks from art and literary critics such as Clement Greenberg and Dwight Macdonald, and from European academics sensitized by fascist propaganda, cemented the impression of many by mid-century that middlebrow culture was debased and even dangerous.[8]

Others, even at the time, however, used the term in a more neutral way. A writer for the *Saturday Review* in 1933 defined middlebrow readers as "the men and women, fairly civilized, fairly literate, who support the critics and lecturers and publishers by purchasing their wares." Neither "the tabloid addict class" nor "a tiny group of intellectuals," they are simply "the majority reader."[9] By the late 1940s, American preoccupation with cultural hierarchy had only intensified. In February 1949, *Harper's* published editor Russell Lynes's essay "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow: Which Are You?," which was picked up by *Life* magazine two months later, adding a humorous chart to help readers decide. These articles signaled perhaps the high-water mark of American taste-culture preoccupation.[10] Historian Lawrence Levine, in his masterful study of cultural hierarchy in America, elegantly captures the essence of middlebrow culture, calling fragmentation

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[7] Quoted in Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, xiii.
[8] Clement Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, *Vol. I, Perceptions and Judgments 1939-1944* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 5-22; Dwight Macdonald, "Masscult and Midcult," in *Against the American Grain: Essays on the Effects of Mass Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 3-75; Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, ed., *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 94-136.
[9] Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, xii-xiii.
[10] Michael G. Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 95-100.

into separate taste cultures simply "the cultural consequences of modernization."[11] Indeed, modern life presented unprecedented threats to individuals' sense of a unified self, and also posed, through mass culture, a profound challenge to cultural authority. Middlebrow culture arose as a structural accommodation to these cultural crises.

Religion was not immune from these pressures, as advances in historical, scientific, and philosophical thinking disturbed previous certainties, and forced modern American readers to seek guidance in the field of new religious knowledge, just as they were in all other areas of human inquiry. The war and its aftermath, and increasing urbanization and pluralism, further compounded the sense of bewilderment. In response, a religious middlebrow culture, with its own experts and institutions, emerged in the 1920s as part of the larger middlebrow culture. Religious middlebrow culture became, for millions of American readers after World War I, what Stuart Hall calls a "discursive formation," the social structure in which and through which new knowledge acquired meaning.[12] "The world," Hall observes, "has to be *made to mean*," and religious middlebrow culture shaped the meaning readers found in religious books, as they

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[11] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) 225.

[12] Hall defines a discursive formation as the "ideas, images, and practices" that "define what is and is not appropriate in our formulation of, and our practices in relation to, a particular subject or site of social activity; what knowledge is considered useful, relevant, and 'true' in that context; and what sort of persons or 'subjects' embody its characteristics." Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Press, 1997), 6. For a useful discussion of Hall's notion of "discursive formation" in relation to media and popular religion in the twentieth-century United States, see Sean McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955-1993* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 26-27.

struggled to understand themselves and their relation to society and the sacred order.[13] Middlebrow culture provided a structure that helped make the confusing modern world *mean*. Beginning with the first Religious Book Week in 1921, religious leaders began to offer book lists and reading programs designed to help overwhelmed consumers sort through the mass of new books and new ideas. The most important of the new middlebrow frameworks was the book club, and the Religious Book Club, founded in 1927, one year after the Book-of-the-Month Club, quickly became a central institution for guiding religious reading and book buying.

Religious middlebrow culture, like the broader middlebrow culture, participated in modern consumerism through advertising and other mass media forms, but religious middlebrow also drew on the inheritance of nineteenth-century evangelical hopes and fears about print media. The clergymen, publishers, and other culture brokers who became the arbiters of the new religious middlebrow culture used the latest business and technological advances, as had their forebears, to market their religious messages. But in contrast to the evangelicals of the nineteenth century, these twentieth-century liberals were less concerned about maintaining purity, being *in* but not *of* the world, than with being fully present in the world, redeeming it from the inside out. These modern bookmen understood the anxiety and disorientation of their fellow educated urbanities, and recognized with them as well the appeal of new approaches to the self and the divine that had engaged religious liberals since the nineteenth century. The transformative

[13] Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of Ideology: The Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," in Veronica Beechly and James Donald, eds., *Subjectivity and Social Relations* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985), 34.

power of the 1920s innovations in bookselling came from the sensitivity of the modern bookmen to the anxieties of the age. In the book weeks and book clubs they managed to unite modern business practices, modern religious ideas, and a continuing faith in the wonder-working power of print, all in service of the liberal agenda of building God's kingdom on earth.

Though religious middlebrow culture differed from the larger middlebrow project in important ways, it nevertheless shared the same essential structure. Two dynamics provide a sense of the middlebrow rules. Readers, in navigating the contradictions and tensions of these prescribed practices, marked out what historian Joan Shelley Rubin has aptly termed "the 'middleness' of middlebrow culture."[14] Middlebrow reading norms, first of all, dictated that one read earnestly, intensely, and with purpose, in the recognition that right reading would make one better—while refusing, at the same time, to accept the transcendent difference of high culture. Evangelicals like Noah Porter and George Philip Philes in the nineteenth century may have seen consumerist and religious reading as mutually incompatible, but middlebrow reading practices of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s called upon readers to engage in the consumer marketplace for books precisely in order to become more than just a consumer. Rufus Jones, in fact, in his 1921 endorsement of Religious Book Week, echoed the code of middlebrow reading just as surely as he did that of his religious reading predecessors when he told his audience to buy books and read them with pencil in hand. Yet even as middlebrow culture elevated and ennobled readers, it brought high thinking and eternal truths down to earth, to be sold alongside

[14] Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, xvi.

other commodities. Selling books as advertisers sold soap, according to Janice Radway, "threatened to rework the very notion of culture itself as a thing autonomous and transcendent, set apart and timeless, defined by its very difference and distance from the market," a notion of culture espoused most influentially by Matthew Arnold and other adherents of the nineteenth-century genteel tradition.[15] In the twentieth century, middlebrow culture brought the lofty within reach, whether that was literary modernism, continental philosophy, or the latest output from American seminary professors.

The second dynamic of middlebrow culture was the simultaneous embrace of autonomy and expertise. This dialectic shaped reading practices, including the reading of popular religious books, by carefully shepherding readers through the chaos of reading choices, offering them the comfortable and limited freedom to act as guided consumers. Cultural changes, most centrally the standardization that accompanied economic growth, "made it more difficult for experts [by the 1920s] to insist that the route to autonomy lay in the self-abnegation the genteel tradition had demanded," yet, according to Rubin, "readers overwhelmed by the spiraling numbers of book titles required help in selecting the 'best.'"[16] The tension between autonomy and expertise had been, at a basic level, fundamental to the Protestant experience itself from the Reformation forward, as the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, increasing literacy, and vernacular translations of the Bible undermined the clerical caste's monopoly on spiritual authority. In the twentieth-century United States, professional specialization, the Progressive emphasis on

[15] Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 128.
[16] Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 31, 32.

technical expertise, and simply the ever-more complex nature of modern urban life pulled readers towards greater reliance on literary guidance, while the logic of consumerism, rooted in the all-powerful choice to buy or not to buy, further reinforced the notion of reader autonomy.

The overriding concern of middlebrow readers, the very reason, in fact, for bothering with all this difficult decision-making, was the widely held assumption that proper reading would lead to self-improvement, what commentator David Brooks calls, without condescension, the "take-your-vitamins earnestness [of] the middlebrow enterprise."[17] The exhortations of advertisers to improve one's appearance, hygiene, and personality and the competitive struggle of modern life fueled consumer anxieties and stoked demand for readily available solutions. The slogan for much of Religious Book Week, "Good Books Build Character," offered one such solution—read the right kinds of books, it said, and you can create a self immune from the push-and-pull of modern living, a character rooted in timeless values. The rise of religious middlebrow culture was both an indication of these individual and social anxieties and a central means by which middle-class Americans forged new identities in the changing environment. "[M]any Americans," Rubin writes, "adrift in uncharted waters . . . sought stability, insight, and pleasure in the books to which they were directed."[18]

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[17] David Brooks, "Joe Strauss to Joe Six-Pack," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2005. Brooks's column presents a wonderfully succinct, balanced, and empathetic defense of mid-century middlebrow culture, when, in his words, "there was still a sense that culture is good for your character, and that a respectable person should spend time absorbing the best that has been thought and said."

[18] Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 27.

Book Lists, the Religious Books Round Table, and Religious Middlebrow Culture

The most basic form of guided reading was the book list, a staple of middlebrow culture since Dr. Eliot of Harvard introduced his famous "Five-Foot Shelf of Books" in 1909. Dr. Eliot, as we have seen, became an early supporter of Religious Book Week, and from the beginning of the campaign in 1921, numerous other self-proclaimed experts stepped forward with reading lists to guide consumers newly awakened to religious reading. *The Continent*, for example, published in its 1921 Religious Book Week issue a list of one hundred recently published books on religious topics, compiled by a retired pastor. The reading program included books of modern scholarship on the Bible, history, and science, as well as books of spiritual interest, such as *Spiritual Voices in Modern Literature* and *Christ in the Poetry of Today*. Each book was chosen to be "helpful in clearing the mind and guiding thought in these interesting days."[19] The Reverend Gaius Glenn Atkins, pastor of the First Congregational Church in Detroit and a prominent author, published two lists in the book review section of the *Detroit Free Press* during Religious Book Week in 1923. The first list consisted of books featuring "an intellectual approach," including works on faith and science, and new books from liberal theologians Borden Parker Bowne and William Earnest Hocking; the second list featured devotional classics, including *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Imitation of Christ*.[20] Frederick D. Kershner, Professor of Christian Doctrine at Drake University in Iowa, devised yet another list, a program of fifty-two books to be read over the course of a year. "Since the appearance of Dr. Eliot's famous

[19] List reproduced in *Publishers' Weekly*, February 19, 1921, 515.
[20] "Religious Book Lists," *Publishers' Weekly*, March 17, 1923, 942.

five-foot bookshelf," he exclaimed, "the attention of the general public has been directed to almost numberless schemes for systematic reading," and Kershner, like Glenn, aimed to use his scheme to guide readers through the confusing proliferation of modern religious works.[21] Kershner's program started with outlines in Biblical history and interpretation, moved to Hendrik Willem Van Loon's *The Story of Mankind*, and spent many weeks in modern thought and literature, including Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* and volumes from Bertrand Russell. Titles from pacifist Sherwood Eddy, and Williams College professor James Bissett Pratt's *The Religious Consciousness* and *Matter and Spirit*, provided introductions to contemporary religious thought on social, psychological, and spiritual matters.

The most ambitious and influential list-making enterprise came from the American Library Association, the professional association for public and academic libraries.[22] Members of the ALA formed a Theological Libraries' Round Table in 1916—later called the Religious Books Round Table—to facilitate cooperation among theological librarians, but membership was open to any member of the ALA interested in religious literature.[23] Librarians from public libraries soon began to voice their unique

[21] Frederick D. Kershner, "'A Book a Week': How a Worth-While Slogan Can Be Profitably Applied," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 17, 1923, 503.
[22] The standard work in the history of the American public library in this period is Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003). See also the collection of essays in Thomas Augst and Wayne Wiegand, eds., *Libraries as Agencies of Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003). Neither book addresses the matter of religious literature in public libraries.
[23] The organization changed names frequently. In 1916 and 1917 it was known as the "Theological Librarians' Round Table." From 1918 to 1923 it was the "Round Table of the Librarians of Religion and Theology" and from 1924 through 1933 the "Religious Books Round Table." The name changed again in 1934 to the "Religious Books

concerns, and out of the persistent urgings of these public librarians, the Round Table eventually shifted its focus from the narrow interests of seminary libraries to the wider matter of religious literature in public libraries, and therefore to the enterprise of selecting the best religious books for the general public. The lists produced by the Religious Book Round Table of the American Library Association from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s constituted the official statement of the library profession on quality in religious reading, and served as a key index of religious middlebrow sensibilities.

At the inaugural meeting of the Round Table—a meeting otherwise devoted to technical matters of indexing and cataloging—"Miss Colegrove," a librarian from the Newark Public Library in New Jersey, "asked the assistance of theological librarians in suggesting where she could secure lists of modern, popular religious books." She felt the need for such recommendations, the meeting minutes record, because ever "since 'Billy' Sunday had been holding meetings in New Jersey there had been an increased interest among the patrons of their library in books on religion written in a plain, popular style . . . ."[24] In 1920, after a number of Round Table annual meetings devoted once again to the concerns of seminary librarians, "librarians of public libraries in small communities" returned to the question of "the best method of securing really *valuable* religious works for the *public* library shelf." Many librarians found themselves, they reported, inundated with free books "given wholly for sectarian interests" by members of aggressive "sects," and

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Section" and in 1942 reverted to "Religious Books Round Table." For the sake of clarity I simply refer to the body as the "Religious Books Round Table" or the "Round Table."

[24] "Theological Libraries' Round Table," *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 10, no. 4 (July 1916): 450.

wanted assistance from the ALA in selecting "non-controversial, non-sectarian, religious works, sound in logic, strong in pedagogy, inspirational and constructive in real character building."[25] The leaders of the Round Table suggested, unhelpfully, that these public librarians turn to clergy in their towns for book lists, indicating a firmly held distinction in the minds of the Round Table leaders between marginal sects, which could not be trusted to select proper reading for the public, and mainstream churches, which could, they thought, responsibly safeguard the public interest. In spite of this rebuff, the seed was planted for the professional library association to enter the business of choosing the best in religious literature.

In the early 1920s, as Religious Book Week drew national attention to modern religious books, librarians began to devote more serious attention to the problem of choosing religious literature for the public library. In response to the continuing concerns of public librarians, in fact, the Round Table chose as the theme for its 1921 and 1922 meetings "Religious Books in the Public Library." The kinds of books recommended as appropriate for public libraries closely matched the kinds of books promoted by Religious Book Week—modern, accessible, and "non-sectarian." Elima Foster, Head of the Division of Philosophy and Religion at the Cleveland Public Library and Secretary of the Round Table, told her fellow librarians at the 1921 meeting that "religion is coextensive with the whole realm of human experience," and offered the teachings of William James and James Bissett Pratt as models for understanding religious experience and guiding the

[25] "Round Table of the Libraries of Religion and Theology," *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 14, no. 4 (July 1920): 339.

selection of books.[26] Frank Grant Lewis, Librarian of Crozer Theological Seminary and founder of the Round Table, told public librarians they must "put aside their religious sectarianism" and "be ready to welcome to the library a religious book recognized as valuable to others even tho he himself would shrink from reading it." The only religious bias the public librarian could show, argued Lewis, was "generosity for the so-called modern or liberal points of view," because without exposing its readers to the latest developments in religious thinking, "the library will fail in meeting one of its large opportunities."[27] Librarians from across the country shared this goal of promoting modern religious thinking. Elizabeth Howard West, the State Librarian of Texas, for example, advocated modern religious literature for public libraries, though she noted that "librarians have to be . . . wary, if their clientele is inclined to be conservative." The "righteous cause of breaking down narrowness and intolerance is best served by tact," West wrote, but ultimately "the hope of the future religiously" lies with those open to new books and ideas in religion, for "religious faith is not hurt, but only strengthened and rationalized by such reading."[28] The task of choosing the best modern religious books, according to West, Lewis, and other librarians, was one part of the larger pedagogical enterprise of middlebrow culture.

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[26] Elima A. Foster, "Representations of Religious Thought in the Public Library," a paper presented to the Libraries of Religion and Theology Round Table of the American Library Association, June 24, 1921. Reprinted in *Publishers' Weekly*, March 18, 1922, 845.
[27] Frank Grant Lewis, "Selecting Religious Books for a Public Library," a paper presented to the Libraries of Religion and Theology Round Table of the American Library Association, June 29, 1922. Reprinted in *Library Journal* 47, no. 14 (August 1922): 646.
[28] Elizabeth Howard West, "Religious Books Are in Demand," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 17, 1923, 507.

In 1925 the Round Table began to issue a list of the top forty or fifty (the number varied) books on religion published in the preceding year, culminating nearly a decade of discussion on the matter. In many ways the annual lists, though intended primarily as a buying guide for public libraries, carried forward the project of Religious Book Week. Frederic Melcher had addressed the Round Table in 1921 to brief them on the inaugural book week, and in 1922, after a presentation from Marion Humble, the Assistant Secretary of the National Association of Book Publishers, the Round Table passed a resolution encouraging all public and theological libraries to support Religious Book Week, commending "the efforts of the Religious Book Week Committee to spread the news of religious books among people . . . ."[29] In 1924 the Round Table officially changed its name to the "Religious Book Round Table," reflecting its move away from the professional concerns of seminary librarians and toward the larger matter of the place of religious books in public and general-purpose libraries. Frank Lewis, in announcing the first book list, which he had personally selected, at the 1925 meeting, also noted the formation of a separate organization for theological librarians, indicating the permanent shift in focus of the Religious Books Round Table to general libraries and general readers. The organizers of Religious Book Week, in their effort to stimulate sales, advanced a vision for a national spiritual center, and the professional librarians, in tackling the problem of choosing religious books for public libraries, now also arrived at the same crossroads.

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[29] "Libraries of Religion and Theology Round Table," *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 16, no. 4 (July 1922): 299.

The Religious Book Round Table's list quickly gained recognition beyond libraries and librarians, becoming a widely accepted public record of the most important new books on religious matters. From the list's inception in 1925 until the disbanding of the Religious Books Round Table in the late 1950s, newspapers across the country regularly published the round table's annual pronouncement as a public service. In May 1929, for example, *The New York Times* reproduced the list, declaring it the "List of 'Most Important' Volumes of Kind of 1928." Frank Lewis, in revealing the list at the ALA convention in Washington, DC, noted that the diversity of books on the list meant Protestants and Catholics, conservatives and liberals, were each likely to find titles that both pleased and dismayed them. "Because of such varied characteristics and unwelcome points of view for nearly everybody," he wrote in the ALA announcement, "the list is in some sense representative and worthy of attention on the part of librarians and library readers."[30] Such inclusiveness, thought Lewis and his fellow committee members, gave the ALA book list the legitimacy to serve as a national record of quality religious literature.

An examination of fourteen Religious Book Round Table lists from 1925 through 1949 reveals, indeed, a diversity of recommended books, but with its emphasis on new knowledge, and its ethos of inclusiveness and wide-ranging inquiry, the Round Table's lists nevertheless ultimately reinforced the agenda expressed by Elizabeth Howard West of Texas—the use of religious literature to make a tactful yet unmistakable brief for religious liberalism. The ALA's selection criteria, as expressed in the 1935 press release,

[30] "Librarians Pick 50 Religious Books," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1929, 7.

"were the needs of the average public library and the interests of the general reader," but from these criteria the committee that year arrived at but one unanimous selection, *The Secret of Victorious Living* by Harry Emerson Fosdick, the leading liberal preacher and writer of the day.[31] Using the imagined categories "average public library" and "general reader" as selection criteria led the ALA inexorably in ecumenical and liberal directions. The 1939 committee, composed "of men who have a wide knowledge and a sound appreciation of modern religious literature" produced a list, it declared, with a "non-denominational character" that would be of "great practical value in meeting the librarian's problem of selecting religious books."[32] The American Library Association gave its imprimatur each year to the "most outstanding books" in religion, and it consistently equated "most outstanding" with "modern" and "non-denominational."

The annual selection committee, not surprisingly, for most of the Round Table's existence consisted primarily of librarians from large public libraries and leading Protestant seminaries, including, on occasion, luminaries such as Halford Luccock and H. Richard Niebuhr of Yale Divinity School and Henry Sloane Coffin and Reinhold Niebuhr of Union Theological Seminary. With very few exceptions, the lists reflected the interests of such committee members. The list offered in the spring of 1932, a fairly typical list, featured books from George Buttrick, Shirely Jackson Case, James G. Gilkey,

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[31] Press Release, June 25, 1935, Religious Books Round Table, American Library Association, American Library Association Archives, Record Series 51/2/2, University of Illinois Archive.

[32] "Fifty Outstanding Religious Books, June 1, 1938 – May 31, 1939," Religious Books Round Table, American Library Association, American Library Association Archives, Record Series 51/2/2, University of Illinois Archive.

E. Stanley Jones, Rufus Jones, Toyohiko Kagawa, Shailer Mathews, John R. Mott, Albert Schweitzer, Willard Sperry, and Ernest Fremont Tittle—a veritable who's who of interwar religious liberalism.[33] Evelyn Underhill, Georgia Harkness, William Earnest Hocking, and Jacques Maritain each made frequent appearances on the list throughout the 1930s. Beginning in the 1930s, the committee added a Catholic and a Jewish member each year to the selection committee, noting that "in this way the total field of representative religious thought has been thoroughly explored. . . ."[34] The bewildering array of book choices led readers to rely increasingly on expert guidance, and the ALA book list, like lists from preachers and professors, offered reliable advice in confusing times.

THE RELIGIOUS BOOK CLUB

In addition to book lists, cultural arbiters in the 1920s began to turn to the other critical innovation of middlebrow culture, the book club, to help steer readers through the maze of new offerings. By far the most significant of these was the Religious Book Club, though a host of smaller religious book clubs emerged throughout the decade. Many local churches created clubs for members, such as a plan from a Presbyterian Church in Detroit that the pastor described as aiming "not simply to induce men and women to

[33] "Important Religious Books, 1931-1932," Religious Books Round Table, American Library Association, American Library Association Archives, Record Series 51/2/2, University of Illinois Archive.
[34] "Fifty Outstanding Religious Books, June 1, 1938 – May 31, 1939," Religious Books Round Table, American Library Association, American Library Association Archives, Record Series 51/2/2, University of Illinois Archive.

read, but to direct them in their reading."[35] Twenty-four churches in Montclair, New Jersey, jointly created an Inter-Church reading program in 1925. An organizing committee devised a reading list, and issued an invitation to members of area churches "to join in a Community Reading Plan along the lines of World-Friendship and Christian Internationalism." The committee arranged for the local public libraries to purchase the books and display them prominently on special shelves, while the Montclair *Times* published an "Honor Roll" of top readers. "It seems appropriate that this should be sponsored by the churches," the committee announced, "for it is our Christian ideals which are challenged by the manifold problems confronting us today. We, therefore, need a more unified, enlightened Christian opinion."[36]

As publishers and booksellers began to notice the increasing commercial viability of modern religious books, it became inevitable that the impulses behind the reading clubs of churches and endeavors such as Religious Book Week would lead to a book club for religious literature. Commercial opportunity, fueled by an attractive selection of new books, and a deep yearning for expert guidance—this was the formula for book club success. And so, in 1927, the final year of Religious Book Week and only a year after the founding of the Book-of-the-Month Club, the biggest names and most important institutions of the Protestant establishment opened the Religious Book Club for business.

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[35] James D. Jeffry, "How A Pastor Introduces Books to His People," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 23, 1924, 594.
[36] Hope Reynolds Myers, "Inter-Church Reading Program," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 20, 1926, 586.

"BOOKS, BOOKS EVERYWHERE! Are you overwhelmed each month by the flood of new books?" screamed the advertisement. "Have you the time and eyesight to spare to discover among these volumes the one or two which will minister to your spiritual needs? Can you find, among this vast outpouring, the one or two books which will add richness and depth to your religious outlook? Have you not often felt that for the sake of your own self-development you ought to read more of the great books on religious life and thought?" Whether pastor or lay reader, living in the country or the city, an answer was now at hand—the Religious Book Club. "Would it not be an ideal situation if you could find in your hands each month a book that is truly significant, truly inspiring, a book whose spiritual worth has been tested and endorsed by five great religious leaders?"[37]

The original idea for the Religious Book Club came from Stanley A. Hunter, pastor of St. John's Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, California. He wrote to Samuel McCrea Cavert, General Secretary of the Federal Council of Churches—the central institution of Protestant ecumenism, founded in 1908—asking if the FCC might offer a service to ministers across the country overwhelmed by the problem of selecting the best new religious books. Cavert spoke with Maxwell Geffen, president of Select Printing Co., and the two devised the outlines for a book club. Geffen would serve as business manager, and Cavert as editorial secretary. An editorial committee of eminent church

[37] Religious Book Club advertisement. Publication information uncertain. From context it clearly appeared in the fall of 1927 or the winter of 1927-1928, soon after the club debuted in November 1927. Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers, the Burke Library archives at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

leaders would choose the main book of the month, as well as a number of alternate recommendations, and write the reviews for the monthly bulletin. The Religious Book Club, formed according to this plan, launched in November 1927.[38] Critics, echoing genteel and evangelical fears about the marketplace, denounced Cavert's involvement in a "commercial organization," but the Religious Book Club's founders sought to redeem the culture through engagement, not withdrawal, and the Religious Book Club was born.[39]

The editorial committee, like the committees responsible for Religious Book Week and the religious book list of the American Library Association, came from the ranks of the Protestant establishment; in this case, in fact, from the very highest ranks. S. Parkes Cadman, the English-born pastor of Brooklyn's Central Congregational Church, served as chairman. He was the leading Congregational preacher in the country, and perhaps the leading preacher of any stripe, famous as the country's first radio preaching star; in addition, he wrote a nationally syndicated newspaper column, authored numerous books, and, since 1924, had served as President of the Federal Council of Churches. Serving with Cadman on the selection committee were the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, of Union Theological Seminary and Park Avenue Baptist Church, also a celebrated author and preacher; the Rt. Rev. Charles H. Brent, Episcopal Bishop of Western New York

[38] This account of the club's origin is from "Religious Books of the Month," *Publishers' Weekly*, October 29, 1927, 1641-1642. A slightly different version—in which the idea originated with Cavert—is found in William J. Schmidt, *Architect of Unity: A Biography of Samuel McCrea Cavert* (New York: Friendship Press, 1978), 306. The Schmidt account is based on a personal interview with Cavert conducted in 1971, more than forty years after the fact.

[39] Schmidt, *Architect of Unity*, 75.

and former Chief of Chaplains of the American Expeditionary Forces during the World War; Methodist Bishop Francis J. McConnell of Pittsburgh, President of the Religious Education Association; and Mary E. Woolley, President of Mt. Holyoke College, President of the American Association of University Women, and member of the board of the YWCA. The Religious Book Club, from its inception and for many decades to come, endeavored to set the nation's religious reading agenda, drawing on the expertise and celebrity of the most well-known and well-regarded religious leaders in the country.

Dr. Cadman, in announcing the formation of the club, captured the spirit of the times, both Lippmann's sense of crisis and the business boosters' optimism. "Some gravely question whether civilization will go down in a crash" while "[o]thers give way to an acrid cynicism," he proclaimed. "The sweeping developments in science and world affairs," developments not to be feared in their own right, nevertheless demand "all thoughtful people to be rethinking constantly the meaning of religion for human life. Unless one does this," Cadman warned, "he is in danger of finding himself swept loose from his moorings and not knowing how to anchor himself to any spiritual realities." Fortunately, in spite of the unsettling pace of modern life, and the rapid and confusing profusion of new ideas, new religious thinking offered even disillusioned moderns "faith in the reality of the unseen world" and in the "goodness and righteousness at the heart of the universe." Americans in the 1920s were awakening to the hope offered by the latest

religious thinking, insisted Cadman, and the "Religious Book Club is one more indication of the extraordinary interest in religion today."[40]

Cadman's vision for the Religious Book Club placed it squarely alongside *Reader's Digest* and the Book-of-the-Month Club as a tool for earnest, intelligent, and curious readers seeking guidance in confusing times. "The undertaking was born in the conviction that hosts of men and women all over the United States are hungrily seeking for light on the great problems of religious life and thought," Cadman announced. "[T]he Religious Book Club hopes to make a modest contribution, by drawing larger attention to the most worthwhile publications, now too much neglected because of the notoriety achieved by sensational volumes of no enduring significance." The mass market simply overwhelmed readers with hyped bestsellers and sheer consumer excess, leaving those seeking to better themselves helplessly adrift. "The man in the street, who often seems concerned only with the stock market and the World Series, is really immensely interested in religion," Cadman proclaimed. "Such people are eager to avail themselves of the best opportunity to keep abreast of the best insight and scholarship in the realm of religion."[41]

Here, quite simply, was what the Religious Book Club offered—the best. It delivered the best books written by the best minds selected by the best religious leaders offering the best solutions for the vexing problems of modern living, at a discount, to your home, once a month. "I appreciate, more than I can express, the service which the

[40] "Religious Books of the Month," *Publishers' Weekly*, October 29, 1927, 1641-1642.
[41] "Religious Books of the Month," *Publishers' Weekly*, October 29, 1927, 1641-1642.

Religious Book Club is rendering," wrote a Seattle minister to the book club offices. "A man who is free to read what he will does not always read what he should!" Another letter writer announced his delight at "having my books selected by master minds," while a third, a minister from Mount Pleasant, Michigan, described the book club experience as "like being taken into the study of each of the members of your committee and given a share of an intimacy of which ministers in small towns are sorely in need."[42] Ministers and lay readers alike hungered for uplifting religious conversation and community, and the Religious Book Club allowed its members, scattered across the country and the world, to share the same texts, ideas, and experiences.

Under the direction of Cavert, Geffen, and Henry Smith Leiper, Cavert's successor as editorial secretary, the Religious Book Club grew rapidly in membership and influence in its early years. In May 1927, just months before the book club's November debut, the Rev. Joseph Fort Newton, an editor at the *Christian Century*, remarked that "we ought to have some competent guidance in the midst of the maze of books. . . . It is amazing to me that the Literary Guild and the Book of the Month Club have apparently excluded religious books from their lists."[43] Many others evidently saw the need as well, as membership rose quickly. In only its second month it could boast of members in every state and in China, Mexico, Canada, Switzerland, England, Scotland, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico (most members outside the United States appear to have been American

[42] Letters to the editor, published in *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, June 1928, December 1927, and June 1928. Copies of the *Religious Book Club Bulletin* were examined in the Library of Congress, which holds the only extant collection.
[43] J. F. Newton, "Religious Books," *Publishers' Weekly*, May 21, 1927, 2003.

missionaries). Total membership increased more than six-fold in the first seven months, from nine hundred eighty to nearly sixty-five hundred.[44] The club regularly touted its selections for topping the bestseller list of *Church Management*, a leading ecumenical periodical.

Reports also came back of libraries, bookstores, and community reading groups using the book club's selections as guides for choosing their own stock or reading lists. The problem of proper selection was especially critical for libraries, noted one librarian, since the public librarian "represents a non-sectarian institution and therefore shuns the sectarian and highly controversial book." Marcia M. Furnas, Chief of Circulation of the Indianapolis Public Library, addressed this problem with the assistance of the Religious Book Club. "We have usually prepared for distribution during Lent or for Religious Book Week a list of the most interesting titles," she reported. "In our present list, we have used the appeal which we thought the Religious Book Club selection would have, to advertise the books." With this method of selection, she added, "a title on the list can rarely be found on the shelves even long after the list has gone out."[45] A bookstore in Concord, New Hampshire sent its clients a card each month, on which were printed the titles selected by the book club. The bookstore "finds that if the titles are good enough to be selected by the committee of the Religious Book Club," the titles were likely to sell well

[44] As reported in *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, July 1928. By contrast, the Book-of-the-Month Club counted just over 110,000 members in 1929, according to Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 96.

[45] Karl Brown, "The Religious Book in the Library," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 20, 1932, 846-847.

among its regular customers.[46] The *Religious Book Club Bulletin* called attention to yet another "recent and outstanding trend" in the use of its selections—local reading clubs based on the religious book of the month. "Leading citizens in many communities," the editors noted, "are bending every effort to further the interest already aroused in this excellent method of religious education and group thinking. If you think this idea is a worthy one we shall be glad to send you further information."[47]

The membership of the Religious Book Club never grew terribly large, at least by the standards set by *Readers' Digest* or the Book-of-the-Month Club, but given its celebrity editorial committee, its close ties to the Federal Council of Churches, and its status as the first book club in the nation devoted to religious reading, it nevertheless served for decades as the model institution of religious middlebrow culture. Not only bookstores and libraries followed its lead. In 1928, the Rev. Francis X. Talbot, literary editor of *America*, the leading Jesuit magazine, and Thomas D. Kernan of *Vanity Fair* formed the Catholic Literary Guild of America, the administrative structure for a new Catholic Book Club.[48] To help Catholics choose "the books they should read and the books they should

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[46] "Sales Notes," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 20, 1932, 856.
[47] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, August 1928.
[48] *Catholic Book Club: Silver Jubilee, 1928-1935* (New York: Catholic Book Club, Inc., 1953). Pages 18-24 list each book offered as the main monthly selection in the first twenty-five years of the club. On the origins of Catholic reading clubs, see Thomas F. O'Connor, "American Catholic Reading Circles, 1886-1909," *Libraries and Culture* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 334-347. On Catholic reading, particularly in regard to fiction and church censorship, see Una Mary Cadegan, "All Good Books Are Catholic Books: Literature, Censorship, and the Americanization of Catholics, 1920-1960" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1987). On Francis X. Talbot and Catholic literary culture in these years, see Arnold Sparr, *To Promote, Defend, and Redeem: The Catholic Literary Revival and the Cultural Transformation of American Catholicism, 1920-1960* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

leave unread," the Catholic Literary Guild announced it would endorse "the work of any author, regardless of his or her religion . . . if it measures up to our literary standards and at the same time does not violate our teachings."[49] The Catholic Book Club claimed responsibility for introducing French convert Jacques Maritain to American readers in the 1930s, and over the next two decades featured books from Fulton Sheen, Thomas Merton, G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and Clare Boothe Luce. The Freethought Book-of-the-Month Club appeared in late 1928, the Spiritual Book Associates in 1934, and by the 1950s more than fifty similar religious book clubs were in operation, including a range of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish enterprises.[50]

More important than the host of imitators the Religious Book Club inspired, however, is the lofty position it occupied within American Protestantism. The club functioned for decades as perhaps the most influential arbiter of religious reading among mainline Protestants. Endorsement by the Religious Book Club placed a new book, thinker, or idea before the most powerful people in American religious life, especially after October 1930, when the Religious Book Club absorbed the *Christian Century* Book Service, prompting Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of the *Christian Century*, to join an expanded editorial committee.[51] The Religious Book Club serves for the cultural

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[49] "Another Book Club," *Publishers' Weekly*, April 14, 1928, 1624.
[50] "Still They Come," *Publishers' Weekly*, April 14, 1928, 1624. Fifty clubs is the estimate of Eugene Exman; see "Religious Book Publishing," in Chandler B. Grannis, ed., *What Happens in Book Publishing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 341. On the business of religious book clubs, see Judith S. Duke, *Religious Publishing and Communications* (White Plains, NY: Knowledge Industry Publications, Inc., 1981), 131-144. Duke's report indicates twenty religious book clubs in operation in the late 1970s.
[51] Announced in the *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, October 1930.

historian, therefore, as a reflection of the Protestant establishment's sense of itself, of its values and the role it imagined for itself in society. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed great campaigns for inter-religious cooperation, such as the Interchurch World Movement, the continued expansion of the Federal Council of Churches, and historic global ecumenical gatherings at Stockholm in 1925 and Lausanne, Switzerland in 1927, all heavily supported by American Protestants. The Religious Book Club, though an independent corporation, functioned as the de facto voice of the Federal Council in the world of books, with Samuel McCrea Cavert, General Secretary of the Council, serving as the founding editorial secretary, and editorial committee members S. Parkes Cadman (1924-1928) and Francis McConnell (1928-1932) each serving terms as president of the Federal Council. The Religious Book Club embodied the same spirit of earnest inquiry, high civic mindedness, social tolerance, and *noblesse oblige* that animated ecumenical Protestantism. In a culture it saw as drifting farther and farther from its steadying influence, the Protestant establishment used the Religious Book Club and the power of print to define the boundaries of the American spiritual center. Along the way, the Religious Book Club also gave the Protestant establishment's stamp of approval to the kind of spiritual seeking that would increasingly characterize liberal religion in the twentieth century.

The Religious Book Club: Religious Education for the Imagined Center

So what did this imagined center look like? And what shape did this seeking take? In other words, what kinds of books did the Religious Book Club promote, and what kind of books did its members actually read? Essential to liberal Protestant self-identity was an

ethic of intellectual openness rooted in a belief in progress, and the book selections of the club clearly reflected this. Books on matters of science and faith, new Biblical scholarship, and new works in the history of Christianity were the most common selections. Books on contemporary social problems, especially volumes addressing matters of the church in society and in the world, also appeared with regularity, a trend reflecting the Social Gospel tradition in American Protestantism. Finally, the Religious Book Club presented inspirational titles nearly every month as either the main or alternate selections. These books, aimed at enhancing personal devotion and spiritual wellbeing, often presented psychological and mystical approaches to spiritual life, two highly complementary discourses stemming from the efforts of late-nineteenth-century Anglo-American liberals to reconcile modernity and religion. Psychologically informed spirituality made science an aid to religious life, while mystical approaches, by emphasizing ineffable encounters with the divine, safely removed religious experience from the encroachments of materialistic positivism. Psychology and mysticism—as epitomized in the work of William James—each claimed to speak of the universal in religious experience, a claim with great appeal for anxious modern readers seeking a unified self, and for modern religious leaders seeking a unified culture. As we will see, along with psychology and mysticism, perhaps inevitably, came even more esoteric forms of spirituality, from Eastern spiritual practices to various forms of positive thinking.

A nominee for the first editorial committee, Robert E. Speer, turned down the club's offer for fear his participation would "brand him as liberal," a fear borne out by the club's selections over the years, which demonstrated a liberal search for truth beyond

doctrinal particularities.[52] The guiding principle of the book club's selection process, it seems, whether choosing books of pure scholarship, or of social or personal application, was the idea that modern faith transcended sectarianism—the same idea that animated Religious Book Week and the rest of religious middlebrow culture. This did not mean the editors made no room for disagreement; on the contrary, reviews in the *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, the club's monthly newsletter, routinely reflected the controversies within American Protestantism that were so heated in the 1920s. Nor did the editors shy away from the difficult issues raised by Christianity's contact with other faith traditions, whether in the United States or, through missions, around the world. Rather than adhere to a single party line, then, the Religious Book Club simply operated on the presupposition that hearty disagreement and the give-and-take of honest intellectual inquiry constituted the best way to sort out truth from error. The committee, as informed experts, would steer readers toward the best books, and the readers, as autonomous consumers, would select those texts that best suited their intellectual and personal needs, and through this process of guided inquiry a faith robust enough for modern living would emerge.

This was the logic of the marketplace, and the logic of middlebrow culture itself. As part of its ambition to present "the best" for an intelligent and inquisitive reading public, the editorial committee strove to address the central topics of the day from multiple points of view. In April 1930, for example, the editorial committee selected *The Atonement and the Social Process* by Shailer Mathews, the liberal dean of the Divinity School

[52] Schmidt, *Architect of Unity*, 306.

at the University of Chicago, and, as an alternate selection, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* by Princeton Seminary's J. Gresham Machen, the foremost fundamentalist thinker in the nation.[53] In May 1933, the club chose Henry Pitt Van Dusen's *The Plain Man Seeks for God*, a plea by the Dean of Students at Union Theological Seminary for less intellectualism and more personal piety among liberals, which was followed, a few months later, by John Dewey's *A Common Faith*, a book calling for a rationalized faith stripped of supernaturalism. Since modern faith eschewed what Fosdick, an editorial committee member, had called in 1922 the "tiddledywinks and peccadillos of religion," the Religious Book Club fretted not about theological purity. Its commitment was to the best, a commitment that transcended commitment to doctrine or tradition.

Not content simply to juxtapose competing points of view, the club often went so far as to present books with which the committee members personally disagreed, so long as the book presented its case intelligently and lucidly. When the club chose, as an alternate selection, bestselling author and Macalaster College professor Glenn Clark's *How to Find Health through Prayer* in February 1941, for example, the committee recommended the book in spite of "highly extreme and dubious positions" because of its other merits in addressing this critical topic.[54] With great regularity, this willingness to select books representing unconventional thinking on religious matters meant endorsing texts written by non-Protestants. Rabbi Ernest Trattner of Los Angeles had the first such

[53] Erin Smith points out the Mathews-Machen pairing in "The Religious Book Club: Print Culture, Consumerism, and the Spiritual Life of American Protestants between the Wars." Unpublished paper in present author's possession.

[54] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, February 1941. The "dubious position" was the classic mind-cure idea that all disease stems from wrong thinking.

book chosen, in April 1929, a work of Biblical scholarship called *Unraveling the Book of Books*, which addressed both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The first Catholic book came in June 1932, Abbe Ernest Dimnet's *What We Live By*, a book on "how to be happy" that soon became a national bestseller. Many more volumes from Jewish and Catholic writers appeared in the ensuing years and decades, and the breadth of the club's selections eventually reached even beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition to include Buddhist and Hindu texts, such as Swami Akhilananda's *Hindu View of Christ* and *Mental Health and Hindu Psychology*.[55] Overall, the diversity of recommended authors was quite remarkable in the decades after the club's founding. Fulton Sheen and Paul Blanshard, Billy Graham and Aldous Huxley, Martin Buber and Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr and Alan Watts, C. S. Lewis and D. T. Suzuki, Kahlil Gibran and Howard Thurman, Ralph Waldo Trine and W. E. B. DuBois, Theodore Dreiser, Paul Tillich, Kirby Page, Gerald Heard, Jacques Maritain, Walter Lippmann, Roland Bainton, Norman Vincent Peale, Toyohiko Kagawa, Rollo May, T. S. Eliot, John Foster Dulles, William F. Buckley, Jr., Carl Jung, Henry Steele Commanger, Merle Curti, Henri Bergson, Mary Pickford, and Albert Schweitzer all had books chosen as primary or alternate selections between the late 1920s and early 1950s.

In spite of this openness—or, to be more exact, precisely because of this openness—the Religious Book Club remained solidly and consistently a creature of the liberal Protestant establishment. The openness to new ideas characterized by the remarkable roll call of recommended authors stemmed from the "take-your-vitamins"

[55] Religious Book Club selections in November 1949 and August 1952.

quality of the middlebrow project, an effort on the part of the better educated and more sophisticated editorial committee to inform the club's members of the world beyond the safe confines of Euro-American Protestantism. The committee sometimes signaled quite clearly when it was offering vitamins to the members. The October 1928 main selection, for example, James Bissett Pratt's *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, aimed to teach readers "how it feels to be a Buddhist," but the editorial committee, recognizing that Buddhism was an "alien faith" for its members, drew attention to an alternate selection from liberal theologian John Wright Buckham for those unwilling to try Pratt's volume. Many members accepted this alternate offer, making Pratt's book the most substituted of all main selections in 1928. Pratt's work on Buddhism "was apparently too far removed from the ordinary experience of most Americans," Cavert commented, though he found consolation that, nevertheless, a majority of the members were "ready to explore a realm that a few years ago was almost *terra incognita*."[56] Reading a work on Buddhism or any other "alien faith," or a book with challenging new ideas on science, history, politics, or Biblical interpretation, was intrinsic to the middlebrow agenda of reading for self-improvement. Through the reading practices of the club—through this exercise in intellectual inquiry unfettered by doctrine—the club and its members performed, in their selecting, reviewing, and reading, the liberalism of liberal Protestantism. The Religious Book Club used the reading practices of middlebrow culture to evangelize a broadened

[56] Samuel McCrea Cavert, "What Religious Books Are Read," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 16, 1929, 752.

and liberalized faith among mainline Protestants, and to create among its readers a virtual community, exploring faith together through shared reading.

The most common books recommended by the club were titles on science and faith, and modern approaches to church history and Biblical scholarship. These books most directly allowed club members opportunities for self-improvement through educational reading. The list of main and alternate selections from the 1920s and 1930s simply on topics of science and religion—*Science and Human Progress*, *Science Rediscovers God*, *Does Science Leave Room for God?*, *Science and God*, *Science and Religion*, *Through Science to God*, *From Science to God, Science in Search of God*, and *Christian Faith and the Science of Today*—reveals the club's core belief in intellectual engagement with the most controversial topics of the day. In recommending *From Science to God*, a highly philosophical tome aimed at skeptics, the committee remarked that the findings of this book "may not seem adequate to those who have been reared in an atmosphere of Christian faith," yet they found the book compelling because it demonstrated "a sound scientific and philosophical basis for religion."[57] Intellectual rigor, not piety, commanded the selection committee's attention—but only intellectual rigor that was simultaneously accessible. When recommending *The Literature of the New Testament*, one of many Biblical studies offered over the years, the committee praised it as "the best single book interpreting modern knowledge of the New Testament—non-academic and superbly readable." Likewise, the book *Faith: An Historical Survey* was offered because of its valuable service in "tracing varying concepts of faith through history." Like the outlines of Will and Ariel Durant or

[57] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, April 1944.

H. G. Wells, *Faith* "summarizes modern developments" for the busy modern reader.[58] Other titles on Biblical and historical matters, including *Revaluing Scripture*, *The Background of the Bible*, *The Social Triumph of the Ancient Church*, *The Church through the Centuries*, *John Wesley and Modern Religion*, and *The Makers of Christianity from Cotton Mather to Lyman Abbott* also appeared in the first decade of the club's existence, among many other titles in these fields. A reader who faithfully followed the reading plan of the Religious Book Club would have received an education on par with that offered by the leading academic seminaries in the country.

The Religious Book Club and Seeker Spirituality

These books of modern learning clearly reveal the Religious Book Club's middlebrow agenda. But the greatest legacy of religious middlebrow culture was not as an institution of popular education in matters of the mind, but as a guide for personal betterment in matters of the heart and the spirit. The "new knowledge," to use Warren Susman's term, that poured forth in increasing abundance from the pens of America's intellectual elite clearly mattered deeply to the religious leaders who ran the Religious Book Club, and they saw guiding their readership through the thickets of this new knowledge as critical to their mission. But ultimately, new knowledge only mattered to the liberal Protestant leaders of the club to the degree that it served a higher purpose, the purpose of sustaining religious vitality in modern times. And so, for all the books on science or history or even the Bible, the Religious Book Club lavished special attention on

[58] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, December 1933. Comments in end-of-year summaries.

books of personal spiritual application, books written to aid happiness, health, wellbeing, and intimacy with God. Here, just as with books on scholarly matters, an ethic of free inquiry reigned, and so, by promoting spiritual exploration through reading, the Religious Book Club and the religious middlebrow culture it epitomized advanced and legitimated a culture of spiritual seeking.

Books of personal spirituality were the most popular of the Religious Book Club's selections from the start. "[T]he fact is," wrote Samuel McCrea Cavert, "that the 1929 volume which proved most popular among members of the Religious Book Club was one dealing not with any of the philosophical or social problems of religion, but rather with the personal inner life and the ways of making religion produce actual observable results in the experience of the individual."[59] The book, University of Chicago philosopher Henry Nelson Wieman's *Methods of Private Religious Living*, addressed mysticism, joy, and prayer life from a psychological perspective, and achieved its success with club members despite the editorial committee calling it an "unusual treatise on the practical development of the religious life."[60] Following this precedent, the book club offered numerous books on psychology, mysticism, and spirituality in the ensuing years, introducing readers to new practices and ideas regarding spiritual life. In essence, the Religious Book Club offered a middlebrow education in being spiritually modern, to complement and enhance the education it offered in being intellectually modern.

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[59] Cavert, "What Books on Religion Do People Read" *Publishers' Weekly*, February 22, 1930, 981.

[60] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, December 1929. Comment in end-of-year summary.

Books on psychology offered the most readily available bridge between modern science and the life of the spirit. Since the late nineteenth century, psychology had served as a critical field of study for liberal Protestant intellectuals searching for modern understandings of the self and of the self's apprehension of the divine—a search most influentially articulated by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). American Protestantism, according to scholars such as Philip Rieff and Julius Rubin, embraced psychology as part of the secularization that accompanied modernity, though the turn to psychology was not without controversy.[61] Charles Clayton Morrison, the editor of the *Christian Century*, and after 1930 a member of the editorial committee of the Religious Book Club, was a chief advocate of psychology within the ranks of the Protestant establishment. Morrison and others like him, Kevin Meador claims, "embraced psychology . . . as a way to make Christianity 'scientific,'" because "science heralded the dawn of a new era of Christian unity."[62] Critics, including most famously Richard Niebuhr in an influential 1927 *Christian Century* article, lamented psychology's ties to theology as "a sterile union," blaming "the revolution . . . introduced by William James and his followers" for degrading historic Christian teachings.[63] The psychological turn, stemming from Berkeley, Hume, Kant, and Schleiermacher in Europe as well as James in

[61] Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); Julius H. Rubin, *Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994).
[62] Kevin G. Meador, "'My Own Salvation': The *Christian Century* and Psychology's Secularizing of American Protestantism," in Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: U of CA Press, 2003), 272, 276.
[63] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union," *Christian Century*, January 13, 1927, 47.

the United States, wrote Niebuhr, "has substituted religious experience for revelation, auto-suggestion for communion with God in prayer and mysticism, sublimation of the instincts for devotion, reflexes for the soul, and group consciousness or the ideal wish-fulfillment for God."[64] While Niebuhr acknowledged that James himself had steered safely clear of such reductionism, his followers, according to Niebuhr, aimed to "show that religion is an epi-phenomenon—a fiction, indeed, explicable but quite unnecessary."[65] Niebuhr's criticisms represented one influential thrust of the neo-orthodox reaction against religious liberalism, but the reaction itself indicates the importance of the changes occurring in American Protestantism—the term "revolution" is not out of place—as increasing numbers of clergy and laity after the war turned to psychological science for spiritual guidance.

Popular culture in the 1920s and 1930s also reflected this ongoing fascination with mind and personality. On the bestseller lists in these years appeared James Harvey Robinson's *The Mind in the Making* (1922); *Self-Mastery through Auto-Suggestion,* by Emile Coué (1923)[66]; *Why We Behave Like Human Beings* (1926); *The Art of Thinking* (1930), by the French cleric and philosopher Abbe Ernest Dimnet, and his follow-up, *What We Live By* (1932), a Religious Book Club selection; *Power through Constructive Thinking* (1932), and *Sermon on the Mount* (1934), positive-thinking classics from the New York Divine Science preacher Emmet Fox; and the industrial psychologist Henry C. Link's 1936 bestseller *The Return to*

[64] Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology," 47.
[65] Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology," 47.
[66] Coué, a Frenchman, made a celebrated tour of the United States in 1922-1923, promoting his system of auto-suggestion summarized by the famous slogan "every day in every way I am getting better and better."

Religion.[67] The American fascination with psychology, spurred by late-nineteenth-century Protestant angst, had by the 1920s become a central cultural paradigm for understanding the self, society, and the experience of the divine.[68]

Offerings from the Religious Book Club in its first twenty years, either primary or alternate selections, included at least forty-five titles containing the words psychology, psychiatry, or psychoanalysis, from such leading scholars as Leslie Weatherhead, Henry Nelson Wieman, and Carl Jung. The first book club offering on psychology, Harrison Sacket Elliott's *The Bearing of Psychology Upon Religion*, appeared in April 1928, and in 1930 alone, *Psychology and Religious Experience*, *Psychology in Service of the Soul*, and *Sin and the New Psychology* were all book club selections. Many of these titles over the years were books of professional interest in the burgeoning field of pastoral counseling—July 1932, for example, featured both *Psychology for Religious Workers* and *Pastoral Psychiatry and Mental Health*—but most of the titles offered on psychology were of interest to lay readers as well. In reviewing *Mental Hygiene for Effective Living* by Edwin A. Kirkpatrick, former professor of psychology and education at Columbia and Boston Universities, the committee stated the central concern of these books succinctly. "How may we maintain or rebuild a healthy personality," they asked, "in the face of the disintegrating forces of modern times?"[69]

The Religious Book Club presented its members with myriad answers to this basic question. James Gordon Gilkey offered his thoughts on the matter in a 1933 selection,

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[67] From Michael Korda, *Making the List: A Cultural History of the American Bestseller, 1900-1999* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2001).
[68] See in this regard Grace Adams, "The Rise and Fall of Psychology," *Atlantic Monthly* 153 (January 1934): 82-92.
[69] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, November 1934.

Managing One's Self, a book covering ten common problems from the point of view of applied psychology. Other books of inspirational psychology from the 1930s included Yale professor Halford Luccock's *Christianity and the Individual in a World of Crowds*, which, the committee wrote, "gives [a] keen diagnosis of social forces that are crushing personality today," and English pastor W. L. Northridge's *Health for Mind and Spirit*, which argued for "intelligent cooperation between religious leaders and the medical profession" in "language that is readily understood by the non-technical reader."[70] A more influential voice was featured in July 1939, when Charles T. Holman's *The Religion of a Healthy Mind* was the main selection. Holman, the director of vocational training at the University of Chicago Divinity School, wrote this book not for his students or other religious professionals, but for "the thoughtful layman." Using James, Freud, and Jung as guides, Holman's path to a healthy mind involved "the discovery of a cosmic Purpose in relation to which one becomes a larger self." "Christian faith," the editorial committee summarized, "is pictured not as an escape from the real but as a discovery of reality. . . . To become 'God conscious' is, in the last analysis, the basic factor in mental health."[71] Carl Jung's *Psychology and Religion*, a March 1938 alternate selection, and Rollo May's *The Springs of Creative Living: A Study of Human Nature and God*, the November 1940 book of the month, offered yet more choices for those seeking psychological enlightenment.

Of all the authors championed by the Religious Book Club, perhaps the most important in the Protestant embrace of psychology were Elwood Worcester and Samuel

[70] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, December 1937 and March 1939. The comments on the Luccock book appear in the end-of-year summary.
[71] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, July 1939.

McComb, disciples of William James and founders of the Emmanuel Movement.[72] Begun in 1905, the Emmanuel Movement was the first sustained effort to bring academic psychology into the life of the church. Worcester, rector of Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Boston, and McComb developed a style of group therapy aimed at healing mind and body, with loose similarities to Christian Science and New Thought. The movement quickly spread through the urban centers of the Northeast, especially among middle and upper-middle class women, and retained a sizeable following into the 1920s.[73] The Emmanuel Movement "helped introduce the new psychology into the church at a time when it was barely understood within the hospital" and anticipated the cultural fascination with psychology after the war.[74] Harry Emerson Fosdick was among an avant-garde of liberal Protestant leaders, influenced by James, Worcester, and McComb, who in the 1920s turned to the new psychology to aid in pastoral counseling. In choosing Worcester and McComb's *Body, Mind and Spirit* as a Religious Book Club main selection in March 1931, Fosdick and the rest of the editorial committee conferred the legitimacy of the Protestant establishment upon a field still viewed with suspicion in some quarters.

The editors knew the book would push the club's members beyond the bounds of familiar religious thinking, but in the spirit of free intellectual inquiry and expert leadership they nevertheless offered Worcester and McComb's volume as a book of

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[72] For a useful overview of the relationship between psychoanalysis in particular and Protestantism in early 20th-century America, see Jon H. Roberts, "Psychoanalysis and American Christianity, 1900-1945," in David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *When Science and Christianity Meet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 225-244.
[73] E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1983).
[74] Holifield, *History of Pastoral Care in America,* 207.

"creative significance," useful as a "guide to the exploration of this new and little known field." The book offered "a simple and comprehensible interpretation of psychoanalysis" with regard to religion, including a high regard for the contributions of Freud, in spite of his "undue preoccupation with sex." Freudian psychology, the committee told its imagined skeptical audience, nevertheless made room for the notion of the soul, and allowed for psychological interpretations of such phenomena as prayer and the healing miracles of Jesus. By releasing the soul from anxiety, fear, and guilt, psychological treatment offered a path to "a more serene inner spirit." Likewise, the review stated, Worcester and McComb demonstrated that faith and prayer facilitated psychological wellbeing and therefore aided bodily and mental health. While many popular books made outlandish claims about mental healing, here "is a treatise," wrote the editorial committee, "that is marked both by sanity and by a spirit of cooperation" between psychological science and spiritual insight.[75] The Religious Book Club featured other books from Worcester and McCombs throughout the 1930s, including the April 1933 selection *Making Life Better.*

Psychology brought modern scientific knowledge to bear on matters of the heart and spirit, but, like other modes of scientific thinking, it also threatened spiritual life with a purely naturalistic understanding of the human self. As a counter to this reductionistic tendency, the Religious Book Club simultaneously featured books of mystical spirituality. As with psychology, the book club's interest in mysticism was evident from the beginning. In November 1927, the club's first month, the committee chose *New Studies in Mystical*

[75] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, March 1931.

Religion by Rufus Jones as an alternate selection, and over the ensuing months and years it featured a steady stream of books on mystical spirituality, including both academic studies and devotional guides. Albert Schweitzer's *The Mysticism of St. Paul the Apostle*, *Christian Mysticism* and *Mysticism in Religion* by William Ralph Inge, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London and professor at Cambridge, and Evelyn Underhill's *Worship* all were book club recommendations, and each placed mystical experience in the center of Christian faith and tradition. These theological and historical studies, like other book club recommendations, introduced club members to the latest scholarship on critical matters. But in addition to serving a pedagogical function, these books were also inspirational, providing resources for spiritual living in a modern scientific age.

Regardless of the specific form or content, in fact, the book club invariably recommended mystical spirituality as a means of keeping religion vital amid the encroachments of modernity. The challenge of science, argued numerous recommended books, posed no threat to a faith predicated on mystical awareness of the divine, and so mysticism became a bulwark against materialistic reductionism. The committee recommended for August 1928, for example, *Science in Search of God*, by Kirtley F. Mather, head of the Geology Department at Harvard, because Mather argued that religion must not attempt to counter scientific thinking, but rather chart a course for living a spiritually abundant life, including prayer and meditation, within a scientifically modern society. Likewise, *Beyond Agnosticism,* the May 1929 selection from Columbia University chaplain Bernard Iddings Bell, was recommended because it, too, offered mystical spirituality as a path that allowed one to live in concert with, rather than against, scientific thinking.

Bell's book, wrote the committee, gave readers an "arresting presentation of the inadequacy of any materialistic interpretation of life."[76] Georgia Harkness's *The Resources of Religion*, the March 1936 main selection, argued that the main purpose of religion was to give "'a sense of direction' so that one no longer feels 'lost.'" The committee recommended the book because "of its exceptionally lucid portrayal of religion and its high significance for modern life," a case made with "intellectual vigor and an inspirational quality." "It is not merely an argument about religion," the editors exclaimed, "it is vital religion revealing its secret to others."[77]

Of all the books on mysticism recommended by the Religious Book Club, the committee members praised most exuberantly the works of Rufus Jones, professor at Haverford College, leader of the American Friends Service Committee, and "the best known of living American mystics."[78] After choosing *New Studies in Mystical Religion* in the first month, the club recommended fifteen Rufus Jones books in the next twenty years, including four as main selections. The writings of Jones combined modern scientific knowledge with mystical vitality and social engagement, all written in a lively prose style replete with personal anecdotes and folksy yarns, a perfect blend of ingredients for the book club's purposes. The committee, in reviewing Jones's *Pathways to the Reality of God* as the main selection for September 1931, noted the "revival of interest in mystical experience," and commended Jones for his discussion of mystics as "practical men," not dreamy spiritual escapists. The April 1936 featured title, Jones's *The Testimony of the Soul*,

[76] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, December 1929. Comment in end-of-year summary.
[77] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, March 1936.
[78] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, September 1931.

offered "a winsome summary of his life-long reflections and scholarship."[79] The writings of Rufus Jones, as the reviewers noted, were the critical texts in the revival of mysticism between the wars, and the Religious Book Club played a critical role in bringing his work to wide public attention.

Rufus Jones, Dean Inge, Georgia Harkness, and Evelyn Underhill all presented mysticism from within established churches and the broad parameters of historic Christian teaching. But the Religious Book Club, in its ambition to offer the best modern religious literature regardless of doctrine or tradition, also featured works of mystical spirituality that reached even farther afield. As an alternate selection in 1935, for example, the club presented *My Adventure into Spiritualism*, an autobiographical account from a Congregational minister. "It constitutes a sober and factual recital of experiences which will be read with profit by an open-minded person," the committee wrote. "The author did not find spiritualism any substitute for his Christian faith. But he found psychics possessed of something which enriched and deepened that faith. . . ." The book, the committee concluded, "might well be studied by those who have preached immortality and who may be all unconsciously avoiding one of the avenues by which that faith stands abundantly justified."[80]

In addition to spiritualism, the Religious Book Club also presented texts from the mind cure strand of liberal religion. Mind cure had developed in concert with psychological science and mystical spirituality in the late nineteenth century, and

[79] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, April 1936.
[80] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, August 1935.

remained an important form of popular religious thought and practice throughout the twentieth century. The book club reviewers often remained skeptical of mind cure claims, yet nevertheless offered books from positive-thinking luminaries like Glenn Clark and Norman Vincent Peale throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Clark's claims about healing were "highly extreme and dubious positions," according to the 1941 review of *How to Find Health through Prayer*, and Peale's 1948 *A Guide to Confident Living* might "unintentionally create the impression that 'success,' in the worldly sense of the term, is the main contribution of religious faith," yet the editorial committee nevertheless featured these titles as alternate selections so readers, as free consumers and fellow spiritual explorers, might decide for themselves.[81]

By the mid-1940s, the Religious Book Club began to receive criticism for its wide-ranging book choices. *Time* magazine, in November 1946, wryly commented, "The Religious Book Club has no Index Librorum Prohibitorum—it is proud of its lack of religious rigidity in the books it recommends to subscribers. But this month many a Christian thought the club's board of editors might well be ashamed of its religious laxity" for its choice of the Robert Graves novel *King Jesus.*[82] The editors of *Time*, in fact, might well have directed their scorn at any one of a number of choices, for in the preceding years the club had chosen as alternates Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means* (December 1937) and *The Perennial Philosophy* (January 1946), the classic statement of the essential unity of the world's mystical traditions. The club also chose as an alternate selection in April 1944

[81] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, February 1941 and April 1948.
[82] *Time*, "Religious Books?" Religion Section, November 4, 1946, 72.

Huxley's friend and colleague Gerald Heard's *A Preface to Prayer*. Huxley and Heard had emigrated from England in 1937, and together with writer Christopher Isherwood immersed themselves in Vedantism in Southern California.[83] Heard's book discussed three levels of prayer, the highest being the mystical "pure concentration upon God." "Mr. Heard," the Religious Book Club's review noted, "draws in part on the Christian mystics but almost as much upon Hindu and Buddhist philosophy." In describing Heard's treatment of prayer, meditation, and "universal Consciousness," the reviewers noted, "Some of these suggestions will seem rather strange to those not familiar with mystical disciplines."[84]

CONCLUSION

The examples of spiritualist and mind cure texts, and the writings of Huxley and Heard, demonstrate the way in which middlebrow culture and the ethos of consumerism fostered spiritual seeking in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Though the reviewers themselves expressed skepticism on occasion toward these more unconventional forms of spirituality, the commitment to intellectual openness and free spiritual inquiry that led them enthusiastically to embrace psychology and mysticism led as well to these farther-flung teachings. The very mission of the Religious Book Club, in fact, as the leading institution of religious middlebrow culture, was to introduce readers to new ideas, to

[83] On the seeker culture built by Jones, Huxley, Heard, and others, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality of Emerson to Oprah* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 227-268.
[84] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, April 1944.

challenge staid teachings and practices, to give readers their intellectual and spiritual vitamins. Psychology and mysticism attracted liberal Protestants in the first half of the twentieth century because they offered modern universal vocabularies to compass the life of the spirit. In this quest for a universal spiritual idiom, the Religious Book Club and religious middlebrow culture became agents of wider and wider spiritual exploration.

Remarkably, even as the Religious Book Club offered members texts from the edges of liberal spirituality, it remained firmly rooted in the very center of American Protestant institutional power. Founding editorial committee member Harry Emerson Fosdick, the most famous preacher in America after his move to the Riverside Church in the late 1920s, remained on the committee into the 1950s, as did Samuel McCrea Cavert and Charles Clayton Morrison. In the late 1930s, Rufus Jones briefly served as an editor, and after an expansion of the committee in 1946, novelist Lloyd C. Douglas, diplomat John Foster Dulles, and Episcopal Bishop Angus Dun joined, along with Charles Seymour, President of Yale; Methodist Bishop G. Bromley Oxman, President of the Federal Council of Churches; sociologist and author Pitirim A. Sorokin of Harvard; Mildred McAfee Horton, President of Wellesley College; and Rear Admiral William N. Thomas, Chief of Navy Chaplains.[85] In the late 1950s, in yet another reorganization, H.

[85] Prior to the 1946 re-organization, committee members read advance copies of all books submitted by publishers for consideration as book club selections and voted to determine the final offerings. After the re-organization, a professional staff pre-screened submissions, and committee members only reviewed final candidates in their fields of interest. This pattern continued with the 1959 re-organization.

Richard Niebuhr, D. Elton Trueblood, and a young Martin Luther King, Jr. joined the editorial committee.[86]

This group of men and women, drawn from the very pinnacle of the religious establishment in the United States, used their influence in the Religious Book Club not only to introduce American readers to the latest scholarship in science, history, Biblical studies, and social problems, but also to push Americans toward ever farther spiritual horizons. In this way, the religious middlebrow culture of the twentieth century recapitulated the story of Protestantism itself, in which print, from the beginning, has functioned both as an instrument of central authority and as the single most important force in undermining that authority. The priesthood of all believers, in the years after World War I, merged with the kingship of the consumer. Though firmly rooted in institutional liberal Protestantism, religious middlebrow culture fostered a culture of seeking that would define the American religious landscape in the coming decades.

[86] Announced in the *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, October 1959.

Chapter 3: Publishing for Seekers: The Case of Eugene Exman and the Religious Bestsellers of Harper & Brothers

Mary Rose Himler, an executive with the Bobbs-Merrill publishing house, did not mince words in her assessment of the religious book business in the mid-1920s. "[M]ost religious books never reach the great bulk of the reading public," she declared,

> because most religious books are bigoted and prejudiced, because a great many of them can be classified as textbooks for divinity students. Meanwhile, the American public knows exactly what it wants, whether it be automobiles, chewing gum or books and it buys that which gives it the most enjoyment, the better inspiration, the more interesting experience.[1]

What many Americans wanted, it turned out, was precisely the modern inspirational literature promoted by the Religious Book Weeks and offered for sale through the Religious Book Club. In fact, sales of new religious titles increased steadily enough by the mid-1920s that book industry insiders announced the advent of "a decided religious renaissance." "Religion and religious books," according to *Publishers' Weekly* in 1927, had quickly become "a very live topic."[2] Publishers and booksellers looked at the modernization and professionalization of the publishing industry—in particular at the sophisticated marketing of new, "virile" religious literature—and recognized an important shift in the fundamentals of their business. The numbers supported the claim of "renaissance." In 1900 religious books had been the sixth most widely purchased category of new books; by 1928, they were second only to fiction, ahead of biography,

[1] Mary Rose Himler, "Religious Books as Best Sellers," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 19, 1927, 691.
[2] "The Religious Renaissance," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 19, 1927, 684.

history, poetry, and even juvenile literature.[3] The portion of total book sales accounted for by religious books increased 34 percent, according to one measure, from 1925 to 1929 alone.[4]

Then came the Crash. In October of 1929, when the bottom fell out of the stock market, and then in the coming months and years as the crash proved to be truly a Great Depression, the sense of jubilant optimism surrounding religion and religious books crashed as well. Commentators of many stripes soon began to speak and write of a "religious depression" that corresponded with the economic depression, and the business of buying and selling books, including religious books, suffered greatly. Total book sales dropped from 219,276,000 in 1927 to 197,259,000 in 1937, but within this drop religious books suffered particularly severe losses; as a percentage of total books sold, religious books declined by 45 percent in the years from 1931 to 1935.[5] This sharp decline in the sales of religious books occurred not simply as a function of the generally dismal economic climate, since religious books suffered a significantly greater drop in sales than others kinds of books. The sales of mass-market religious books plummeted, rather, as part of the broader fate of liberal religion in these years.

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[3] In 1928, 1,135 new fiction titles and 776 new religion titles were published. Figures come from Dorothea Lawrance Mann, "Selling Religious Books," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 22, 1930, 973.

[4] Eugene Exman, "Reading, Writing, and Religion," *Harper's* 206 (May 1953): 85. Exman's figures show religious books, narrowly construed, accounting for 6.1% of total book sales in 1925, and 8.2% in 1929.

[5] The numbers come from Exman, "Reading, Writing, and Religion," 85. Religious books accounted for 8.5 percent of all books sold in 1931, and only 4.7 percent of those sold in 1935.

The core liberal affirmation of progress, and the American Protestant establishment's sense of its custodial relationship to the culture, meant that the crisis now shaking the national foundations shook liberal Protestantism especially hard. Jewish and Catholic congregations, by contrast, grew steadily in membership throughout the early 1930s. Right-wing religious and political movements, such as Frank Buchman's Moral Re-Armament and William D. Pelley's Silver Shirts, and vocal firebrands like Father Charles Coughlin and the Rev. Gerald L. K. Smith, all attracted considerable followings. And new sects and religious movements, such as Father Divine's Peace Mission, briefly flourished as well. But Protestant mainline churches flagged in membership, financial contributions, support for domestic and global missions—and simply in zeal.[6] When Robert and Helen Lynd returned to Muncie, Indiana, in the mid-1930s to follow up on their pioneering *Middletown* study of the previous decade, they found that the congregations of the mainline churches seemed "older than formerly," perhaps because, they reported, "[s]ermon topics in 1935 are interchangeable with those of a decade ago."[7] In spite of a resurgent Social Gospel, institutional liberal Protestantism had failed to mount an adequate response to the national emergency. As one informant in the Lynds' study remarked: "The depression has brought a resurgence of earnest religious fundamentalism among the weaker working-class sects . . . but the uptown churches have

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[6] See Robert T. Handy, "The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935," *Church History* 29, no. 1 (March 1960): 3-16; Martin Marty, *Modern American Religion, Vol. 2: The Noise of Conflict, 1919-1941* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 250-302; Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 918-932.

[7] Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937), 297, 298.

seen little similar revival of interest."[8] The long-term, historic decline in the Protestant mainline, generally described as a phenomenon of the 1960s and later, can in many ways more sensibly be understood as a trend beginning in the 1930s. The postwar revival, due to the Second World War, the baby boom, and suburbanization, appears now as simply a significant but nevertheless fleeting interruption of this larger historical process.

The crisis in the churches accounts to a large degree for the drop in the overall sales of religious books, since the largest sectors of religious publishing consisted of texts for clergy and devotional literature for the laity. Yet the toll of the Depression years cut deeper than economics, and deeper even than institutional religion. In its most intimate manifestations, in the hearts and minds of men and women, the crisis of the 1930s furthered, rather than set back, certain spiritual trends emerging from the fringes of liberal Protestantism in previous decades. The Depression, remarked the journalist and social historian Frederick Lewis Allen, "marked millions of people—inwardly—for the rest of their lives." Behind the raw numbers measuring joblessness and foreclosures "were failure and defeat and want visiting the energetic along with the feckless, the able along with the unable, the virtuous along with the irresponsible."[9] While many contemporary observers, such as the informants of Helen and Robert Lynd, saw the churches as offering little to those in spiritual as well as economic crisis, those hurting in the Depression years were not without recourse. The modern literature of soul care that was marketed so aggressively in the 1920s found a steady audience among the American middle class of

[8] Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, 301.
[9] Frederick Lewis Allen, *The Big Change: America Transforms Itself* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 248-249.

the 1930s. Indeed, the religious establishment represented by the editorial committee of the Religious Book Club began its period of long decline in these years, but the spirituality they promoted only continued to rise. Formal liberal religious theology, in prominent pulpits and seminary professorships, gave way in many places to the emerging neo-orthodoxy, yet popular religious explorations at the margins of liberal Protestantism continued to flourish.

This chapter investigates these trends in religious publishing and middle-class spirituality in the 1930s through a case study of several key authors and their works—in particular, the bestsellers of Harry Emerson Fosdick, Emmet Fox, and Glenn Clark—and the publishing house responsible for them, Harper & Brothers of New York. Eugene Exman, perhaps the most important leader in religious publishing in the mid-twentieth century, was the long-time head of the religion department at Harper & Brothers, and Exman ushered each of these works into print. He embodied as no one else the interplay of modern bookselling, the liberal religious establishment, and the culture of cosmopolitan spirituality that was forged in the crucible of modernity. With a mission to "aid the cause of religion" without advocating for "any particular sect," Exman built the most significant list of religious authors in the publishing business, even as he himself embarked on a prototypical quest for spiritual enlightenment.[10]

[10] Eugene Exman, *The House of Harper: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Publishing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 288.

THE MODERN BOOK BUSINESS: CONSOLIDATION AND SECULARIZATION IN RELIGIOUS PUBLISHING

The religious middlebrow culture that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, though rooted in liberal Protestantism, encouraged a wide-ranging ethos of spiritual seeking. Leaders in book publishing saw these developments and adapted their businesses accordingly. Prior to the 1920s the vast majority of religious literature had been published by denominational houses, by non-denominational evangelical enterprises, or by family-run trade presses with strong connections to institutional religion. Beginning in the middle and late 1920s, however, as the publishing industry professionalized and modern religious literature rose in prominence, a number of prominent New York general-trade presses restructured their religious publishing practices, frequently by establishing specialized religion departments, and emerged as key players in this new field. These houses, especially Harper & Brothers, Scribner's, Macmillan, and Doubleday, Doran, had deep connections to liberal Protestantism, yet they embraced the marketplace with renewed vigor in the late 1920s and 1930s, recasting their businesses in more explicitly commercial terms. The drive to expand sales meant promoting books pitched at the national "spiritual center," and therefore continuing, in many ways, the agenda of religious middlebrow culture established by Religious Book Week and the Religious Book Club. As the Depression undercut faith in the mainline churches, these modern religious publishing houses continued to provide a steady stream of books, furthering the trend toward spiritual eclecticism.

By the late 1920s, industry leaders knew that modern religious books would sell. "Man to man," declared Charles Ferguson, former head of the Religious Books Department at Doubleday, Doran, to his fellow bookmen, "there is reward on earth for some bookseller or group of booksellers who will take religious books seriously and make a normal, intelligent effort to handle them on a sound, commercial basis." "I believe," he added, "with all the fervor of a salesman that there is money in religious books, just as there is in stories of crime and stories of sex."[11] Like their evangelical predecessors in the nineteenth century and, in fact, many of their professional colleagues in the twentieth, leaders in the religious book business often remained wary of treating their product as just another commodity. At the same time, as Ferguson was well aware, many in general-trade publishing and bookselling remained wary of religious books, thinking of them as either dull "textbooks for divinity students" or beneath the intellectual and aesthetic standards of serious book culture. But Ferguson would have none of this. "I often hear urged the irrelevant objection that religious books are full of piffle," he proclaimed.

> What of it, when books on philosophy, self-improvement, the care and feeding of dogs, and contract bridge are open to the same criticism? If the bookseller is to clear his shelves of piffle, he will be in a sad way, and publishers of religious books will suffer less than the rest from the returns for credit. I don't know why it is that a bookseller will think he has to be an apostle to sell religious books.[12]

Ferguson proposed a quintessentially capitalist solution to these dilemmas, a solution designed to appease both religious concerns and secular book dealers: sell "piffle" along with quality and let the market sort it out. Religious middlebrow culture, especially the

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[11] Charles W. Ferguson, "Selling God in Babylon," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 22, 1930 969.

[12] Ferguson, "Selling God in Babylon," 970.

various book lists and book clubs established in the decade after the First World War, had emerged as an alternative to such laissez-faire marketplace thinking by offering a mediating structure between the consumer and the free market. Middlebrow culture addressed the profusion of piffle by offering expert guidance, allowing readers to act as independent consumers, yet with the assurance they were reading only the best. The mediation of middlebrow culture, in this way, allowed those with religious interests to embrace the marketplace without trepidation, and those with commercial interests to embrace religious books without theological expertise or evangelistic ambitions. Middlebrow culture, in other words, allowed trade presses to enter the religious book business with both entrepreneurial ambitions and clean consciences.

The religion trade in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had been largely the terrain of denominational publishers, religious publication societies such as the American Tract Society and the American Bible Society, and, by the end of the nineteenth century, nondenominational evangelical houses, including the Association Press, the publishing arm of the YMCA, and, most notably, the Fleming H. Revell Co.[13] By the late 1920s, however, many of the most successful religious and inspirational titles came not from specifically religious publishers, but from general trade houses. Often the men who ran these firms had long-standing ties to the world of religion, but their firms nevertheless were solidly commercial in orientation. In response to the new religious literature and the rise of religious middlebrow culture, these houses created new religion

[13] Allan Fisher, *Fleming H. Revell Company: The First 125 Years, 1870-1995* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1995).

departments to handle the increasingly sophisticated trade; Macmillan, Harpers, Henry Holt, and John C. Winston all established religion departments in the late 1920s. The irony here is abundant: just as literary forms increasingly blurred the boundaries of the religious and the secular, general trade publishers felt compelled to establish separate religion departments. The turn toward professionalization and scientific management techniques, and the growing awareness of the unique challenges of marketing and selling religious books, led publishers to segregate religion into separate departments, just as writers, booksellers, and religious leaders were championing the new integration of religion into every facet of life.

The increasing prevalence of commercialism in the religious book trade, and the critical importance of middlebrow mediation to facilitate modern salesmanship, was evident to booksellers as well as publishers. "Not long ago, if the bookstore carried religious books at all, they were relegated for the most part to the shelves in the extreme rear of the store," announced J. W. Clinger, advertising manager of the American Baptist Publication Society. In this not-so-distant past, "[t]he austere label of 'Theology' hung over the shelves," yet now, in the late 1920s, "[c]onditions are changing," he declared. "Religious books are coming into their own. They are being brought to the front in more and more bookstores, and the ways of marketing them are being studied."[14] Ideas for marketing religious books abounded. The Rev. Joseph Fort Newton, for example, an editor at the *Christian Century* and a leading liberal Protestant, told a gathering of booksellers that it was "a mistake . . . that religious books are advertised in a department

[14] As quoted in "The Religious Renaissance," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 19, 1927, 685.

by themselves," and others called for the abolition of separate religious bookstores, arguing that such arrangements kept religious books out of the hands of many who might otherwise be reached.[15] Gilbert Loveland of Henry Holt stated the case most clearly. "I, for one," he announced in 1929, "should be glad to see the break-down of the false disjunction between sacred and secular, and, correspondingly, between 'religious' and 'trade' books."[16]

On the eve of the Depression, the business of publishing and selling religious books was in the midst of this significant transformation. Modern advertising and merchandising; book clubs and book weeks; new, popular, practical, and accessible books; and an aggressive move into the general trade arena made religious books more attractive to booksellers and book consumers than ever. "It is becoming quite evident to the book-trade that something is happening with regard to religious books," wrote Wilbur Hugh Davies, a trade publisher at Pilgrim Press, in February of 1929. "Now we find not only the denominational houses, Doran and Revell continuing, but also Macmillan, Scribner's, Harper's . . . either with sizeable religious book departments or building such departments." The reason for this, Davies contended, was the quality of new religious literature and the potential for selling these new books not just in specialized religious bookstores, but also, and especially, through the general trade. Davies firmly believed that sustained growth in the religious sector required these new opportunities to reach the

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[15] Joseph Fort Newton, "Religious Books," *Publishers' Weekly*, May 21, 1927, 2004. *Publishers' Weekly* carried the transcript of lectures given to a gathering of English and American booksellers in London.

[16] Gilbert Loveland, "The Laymen's Interest in Religious Books," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 16, 1929, 754.

public. "It is the opinion of some of us," he proclaimed to his fellow publishers and booksellers, "that the general retail bookstores are best able to furnish this new outlet." He admonished his colleagues, therefore, to "read one of the newer, more popular religious books, [and] discover how different it is from what you have probably thought it was going to be."[17] The new business model, after all, depended on these new books, and booksellers needed to shed their misgivings about religious books if they hoped to capitalize on the emerging opportunities.

After the onset of the Depression, leaders in religious publishing pushed even harder than they had in the late 1920s to distinguish the newer religious books from the dreaded churchly tomes whose sales were plunging. In February 1931, William Savage of Scribner's wrote to his fellow publishers, "We must force home in this religious book business of ours that a religious book is not necessarily a theological book. . . . This is an important maxim that must be recognized in selling religious books today." The new, non-theological books, now more important than ever in the midst of the Depression, according the Savage, were books designed "that man might have a more abundant life" and as "a help in the human adventure." Religion was just plain good business, since "[t]here are religious books for all, from the orthodox fundamentalist to the extreme wing of the humanist group." In the dark hours of the present crisis, Savage concluded, "religious books are making their contribution. Interest in them increases."[18]

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[17] Wilbur Hugh Davies, "Selling Religious Books," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 16, 1929, 749-751.

[18] William L. Savage, "What About Religious Books?" *Publishers' Weekly*, February 21, 1931, 931-933.

The new books that so galvanized these trade publishers and general bookstores in the late 1920s and early 1930s were precisely the kinds of inspirational works of psychological and mystical spirituality advanced by the Religious Book Weeks and recommended by the Religious Book Club, along with an increasing number of more explicitly mind-cure offerings. "Now, religious books have changed incredibly during the past decade," declared Charles Ferguson in 1930, referring to these trends in modern religious literature. "The black line of demarcation between saint and sinner has faded, and with it has gone the disparity which once prevailed between books of the Church and books of the world." The older "books of the Church" no longer spoke to vast numbers of Americans, and so their sales figures had plummeted. But modern religious books, the "[r]eligious books today[,] are for the most part intelligent discussions of factors which concern us all" and their sales, Ferguson saw, remained strong. The reason, according to Ferguson, was simple. As he succinctly put it, "The clerics have learned to write."[19]

Of course more was at work in the success of inspirational literature than simply better writing, yet the new approaches to popular religious writing were indeed significant. The bestselling authors of the 1920s and 1930s, figures like Bruce Barton, Glenn Clark, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Emmet Fox, whom Charles Ferguson declared "are deft at popularizing" and "speak the language of the people," crafted new books aimed to transcend denomination and creed.[20] The churches suffered because many Americans were critical of their failures in the face of the Depression. For this

[19] Ferguson, "Selling God in Babylon," 970.
[20] Ferguson, "Selling God in Babylon," 970.

reason, noted Gilbert Loveland of Henry Holt, these readers "resent being tagged 'religious,' for its history has made hateful the very word, religion, and all its theological word-children."[21] Charles Francis Potter, a former Unitarian minister and an official with the National Association of Book Publishers in the late 1920s, described this new market as "The Non-church-going Religious Group. A great many people in the United States have no connection with any organized religion. They attend no church or temple. Statisticians say there are at least sixty million such in our country."[22] Charles Ferguson, naturally, was ready as ever to see the business potential here. "There is between religion and irreligion today an interplay which has given a decidedly new lustre to religious books. Whatever the theological implications of this fact may be," he wrote, "the message to the book dealer is clear: He will find in the religious books of this hour a legible imaginative piece of work which he can sell."[23] The experts and arbiters of culture would sort out the theological implications; the job of business was to sell.

As many booksellers and publishers were quick to realize, the kinds of religious books that in fact sold in the 1930s were works, by and large, with mystical, psychological, and positive-thinking orientations. Rev. Potter, the Unitarian minister turned publishing executive, saw these trends very clearly. "Booksellers who have the habit of studying types of customers," Rev. Potter wrote, "know that there are many who will not buy an obviously religious book of the standard sort, but who welcome inspirational books which

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[21] Loveland, "The Laymen's Interest in Religious Books," 755.
[22] Charles Francis Potter, "Spring—Religious—Books," *Publishers' Weekly,* February 19, 1927, 687.
[23] Ferguson, "Selling God in Babylon," 970.

are called practical psychology, science of the inner life, philosophy of the soul, the art of living. . . . What many of them want in a book is religion without the conventional label, and the astute book-dealer will be ready for them."[24] Wilbur Davies, who had so ardently counseled booksellers not to fear religious books, likewise recognized "that the inspirational type of book and 'Name Authors' are more likely to sell in the newly developing religious book departments of the general bookstores."[25] As William Savage of Scribner's described the matter: "Many years ago it was science *vs.* religion, now science *and* religion is nearer the truth. Doesn't this very spirit create a more fertile field upon which the religious book can fall?"[26]

The general trade press entered the religious field in the heady days of the late 1920s, in the midst of the sweeping professionalization programs transforming the industry, and the "renaissance" in religious books sales in particular. But before long it was the grim reality of the Depression that determined the fate of their new enterprises. "The vast majority of the . . . titles issued annually in the religious field are technical books—books designed chiefly for ministers and religious workers," Ferguson wrote in 1932, in the depths of the crisis. Given the low pay of most clergy and the falling donations to most churches, a drop in sales of such titles was inevitable, and these losses impacted the whole field. "The preacher is generally a man of the family, and he knows that he has a choice between a new book by Dr. [George W.] Truett and a new pair of shoes for Freddie," he sensibly noted. "It is useless, then, to deny that the depression has

[24] Potter, "Spring—Religious—Books," 688.
[25] Davies, "Selling Religious Books," 749-751.
[26] Savage, "What About Religious Books?" 931-933.

sadly influenced the bulk of the religious book business." Yet, at the same time, Ferguson was astute enough to see the signs of hope, for "what few inspirational books the publishers have to offer are enjoying steadily increasing sales in these times." Book buyers in a time of distress, even in the face of dire economic hardship, Ferguson believed, will still "turn to any book which gives them courage, faith, and a sense of strength in the presence of reality."[27] In the variety of spiritual forms that had emerged from American religious liberalism in the nineteenth century—and that had been marketed to American readers with such vigor in the 1920s—the most successful publishers of the 1930s found the voices to give just such courage and faith and presence of reality. As religious publishers professionalized and secularized in the late 1920s and 1930s, the religion departments at the major general trade presses became increasingly central to American religious reading practices. An examination of the most influential of the new departments, the religion department at Harper & Brothers, indicates some of what this meant for middle-class spirituality.

EUGENE EXMAN AND RELIGION AT HARPER & BROTHERS

The most significant of the new religion departments established in the late 1920s was at Harper & Brothers. Under the tremendously successful and influential leadership of Eugene Exman, who ran the department from 1928, just over a year after its founding, until his retirement in 1965, Harpers ushered into print a remarkable range of important books, from huge bestsellers to erudite professional theology to works from leading

[27] Charles Ferguson, "Religious Books and the Depression," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 20, 1932, 844-845.

activists and clergy. Because of his long tenure, skillful leadership, and keen insight, Exman not only became synonymous with the religion department at Harpers, but he also eventually became the leading figure in American religious publishing in the middle decades of the twentieth century, frequently asked to write and comment on the state of the field. Not insignificantly, his personal story closely tracked that of liberal Protestantism, and much of American spirituality, in this same period. Exman's journey took him from the center of the liberal Protestant establishment to the far reaches of seeker spirituality, all while retaining his stature as a leading figure in religious publishing.

When Harper & Brothers established its religion department in late 1926, it turned first to Walter S. Lewis to guide its operations. Lewis had managed the Book Department of the Presbyterian Board of Publication for ten years, and had been active in the American Booksellers Association and in the planning of Religious Book Week. The firm of Harper & Brothers was one of the venerable New York houses, dating back to 1817, and for much of the nineteenth century was perhaps the nation's leading publisher of books and magazines; for many decades, each succeeding Harper generation that ran the family firm consisted of remarkably devout Methodists and shrewd businessmen, and the firm flourished. This record of prosperity persisted into the 1890s, when a national economic downturn and simple mismanagement required a bailout from J. P. Morgan, and ultimately the imposition of outside control. Harpers subsequently struggled through the early years of the twentieth century, but by the mid-1920s a regime of strict financial discipline, and the hiring of a new generation of young, professional-minded executives, set the firm back on a promising course, finally clear of debt. The

new direction featured a program of professionalization and specialization that resulted in a textbook department and a business book department, and with the renaissance in religious books in the 1920s, the firm decided to enter that expanding field as well. Harpers turned to Walter Lewis, who had a solid track record in the field, and eagerly launched its foray into religious books.

In a published statement summarizing "Why Harpers Have Entered the Field of Religious Books," the firm noted that "the last ten years have witnessed a widely-recognized increase in the demand for this type of literature" and promised to "devote all possible energy, discrimination and enterprise in promoting the publication and distribution of these books with the intention of making the new department an important part of their general business."[28] The announcement noted the passionate interest in religious matters due to the simmering modernist-fundamentalist controversies, and the significant emergence of radio preaching, as factors that seemed to drive readers to the bookstores in increasing numbers. Harpers lured Lewis with the intention to produce "outstanding books of a religious, ethical, and theological character," but Lewis was unable to see that agenda develop in any significant way. He died in February 1928, just over a year after his appointment as the founding head of the department, and in April Harpers hired the young Eugene Exman as his replacement.

Exman came to Harpers from the editorial staff of the University of Chicago Press, where he had managed both the trade and religion departments for the three years

[28] "Why Harpers Have Entered the Field of Religious Books," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 19, 1927, 695.

since his graduation from the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1925. His early years at Harpers saw a rapid and aggressive expansion, often at the expense of his competitors once the economic downturn struck. In 1929 Doubleday sold its list of religious titles—a backlist acquired in the merger with George H. Doran, one the premier publishers of religious materials—to Richard R. Smith, who aimed to establish an independent religious publishing house. Smith hired Charles Ferguson from Doubleday, Doran when he bought the religion list, but Smith's fledgling venture succumbed to the Depression, and Exman and Harpers bought the list in 1932 for a few thousands dollars, which they were able to recoup within two years. Also at that time, in the early 1930s, George Brett of Macmillan fired its long-time religion editor—another casualty of the Depression—and Exman lured many of the best writers away from Macmillan as a result.[29] Exman, in his early thirties, was now positioned as the key broker in the business. As he rose through the ranks at Harpers, becoming a Director in 1944 and a Vice-President in 1955, he retained throughout his responsibilities as primary editor of religious books and manager of the religious book department, a role he did not relinquish until his retirement in 1965.

The key challenge Exman faced early in his tenure, of course, was the crisis of the Depression. Exman, like his colleagues elsewhere in religious publishing, saw the need to tap into the existing market provided by the churches whenever possible, but ultimately

[29] Exman, *The House of Harper*, 235. After his retirement in 1965, Exman became the firm's historian and archivist. On these developments at Harpers, see also John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States, Vol. III: The Golden Age between Two Wars, 1920-1940* (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1978), 240-241. Tebbel's account, it must be noted, contains a number of minor factual errors.

to disentangle religious books from theological books, so that they might continue to sell even as the churches, and books aimed at church workers, faltered. Exman proposed, echoing others in the field, that the trade label books for clergy and the churches as "theological," reserving the term "religious book" for books of inspiration and devotion, "the kind of book that for these many years has called the sinners to repent and the saints to rejoice." Though an active church member himself, Exman recognized nevertheless that "vast numbers of persons find little satisfaction in the activities and rituals of ecclesiastical bodies, yet are intelligently interested in religion." To sell modern religious books, Exman argued, the trade needed to cultivate these customers as well as reliable churchgoers. The future of modern religious books, to Exman, lay with "those who want above all else to be intellectually honest, who, weary of their own conceit, search for reality wherever it may be found."[30] This open-ended search for spiritual bedrock became the principle animating his work throughout his long career as the most influential religious publisher in the country. Exman's continuing sympathy, even yearning, for wider spiritual horizons shaped his work as an editor, and therefore the output of the most important house in American religious publishing.

When Exman began his career as editor of religious books as Harpers, he was a fresh graduate of the University of Chicago Divinity School. By the end of his career, he was a regular speaker at Vedanta Centers, a leader of Wainwright House, a community in suburban New York devoted to spiritual exploration, a writer and speaker on mystical

[30] Eugene Exman, "Modern Religious Books," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 20, 1932, 841-842.

and psychological spirituality, and a participant in pioneering investigations of the spiritual significance of LSD. Exman's journey from the center of the liberal Protestant establishment to the forefront of spiritual exploration exemplifies in many ways the similar journeys of fellow seekers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this regard, he carried the torch passed down from Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, and other elite spiritual adventurers of previous generations. As editor and manager of a leading religious book department, he brought this sense of free intellectual and spiritual inquiry to the mass market. Under Exman, the religion department at Harpers became, like the Religious Book Club, an institution at once firmly rooted in liberal Protestantism yet simultaneously fostering a broadened spirituality.

Exman experienced a profound religious transformation in mid-life, but his spiritual interests and penchant for personal awakenings had deep roots. Born in Blanchester, a small town in southwestern Ohio, on July 1, 1900, to farmers Emmet and Mary Etta Exman, young Gene, as he was called, had at age seventeen what he later termed a "mystical experience."[31] Reflecting back on this and other spiritual awakenings in his life, Exman described "a heightening of reality; a higher sense of unity and a more profound sense of being, a sense of order and of beauty." Such "ecstatic experiences," he explained, induced "a sense of belonging to that which is . . . a feeling of participation, of

[31] Biographical sources for Exman include *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* Vol. 62 (New York: James T. White & Co., 1984), 119; the obituary in *Publishers' Weekly*, October 20, 1975, 38; and the obituary in *The New York Times*, October 12, 1975, 73.

being a part of the creativity that is the base of the universe."[32] This early moment of transcendent clarity obviously impressed Exman greatly, as it became the touchstone against which he measured similar experiences nearly forty years later. Though he would struggle as a young man with religious doubt, Exman took this adolescent experience with him to divinity school at Chicago and later into his professional life.

After primary and secondary education in the public schools of his hometown, Exman attended Denison University, graduating Phi Beta Kappa in 1922. From Ohio he ventured to the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, where he earned an MA in the Department of Practical Theology in 1925, with a focus on religious education. His thesis examined the efforts of the United Christian Young People's Organization, a campaign of young adults from various churches across Oak Park, Illinois, to defeat a proposal to allow the showing of movies on Sundays. Exman's study never revealed his own feelings on the matter of Sunday movies, but rather engaged in a technical investigation of various organizing techniques and how they related to current concepts in social process and organization theory—just the kind of detached, social scientific inquiry expected from a Chicago graduate student in those years. "I remember saying," he wrote later in life, "after that adolescent experience [at age seventeen], that I would never need to doubt God again," but "the unity of knowledge I had then was not intellectually retentive." The rigorous environment of the Divinity School at Chicago, the leading center of rationalized liberal theology in the country, brought Exman to a period of

[32] Eugene Exman, "Individual and Group Experiences," in *Proceedings of Two Conferences on Parapsychology and Pharmacology* (New York: Parapsychology Foundation, Inc., 1961), 10.

doubt.[33] "[L]iving in a secular, cynical society, as I did as a graduate student in Chicago," he recalled, "I swung completely away from this belief" in God and the unity of all things, beliefs that had seemed so certain only a few years earlier.[34] Yet as strained as his own beliefs were, Exman still recognized the power of religious experience itself. When summarizing the value of the Oak Park campaign against Sunday movies, Exman declared, "It must be counted of particular worth because of the emotional attitudes which it developed."[35] Chicago introduced Exman to the world of high-powered liberal theology that would constitute much of his publishing record at Harpers, and though his seminary education precipitated a crisis of faith, it failed to extinguish entirely his early recognition of the transforming potential of personal religious experience.

Exman arrived at Harpers deeply formed by these early experiences, experiences of personal mystical revelation, of intensely rationalized but intellectually exciting liberal theology, of the social utility and ethical force of organized religion, and of the existential travail suffered when one faced the simple yet profound reality of doubt. This personal story meshed with the larger story of liberal religion and print culture in the interwar period, allowing Exman to use his own experiences to craft a successful vision for the religion department at Harpers. Exman guided the work of the department throughout his career according to a simple mission statement, printed on the back of each catalogue

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[33] On the intellectual climate at the University of Chicago Divinity School in these years, see Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 151-208.
[34] Exman, "Individual and Group Experiences, 10.
[35] Eugene Exman, "A Young People's Organization in a Citizenship Project," (MA thesis, University of Chicago, 1925), 31.

the department produced: "to publish books that represent important religious groupings, express well-articulated thought, combine intellectual competence and felicitous style, add to the wealth of religious literature irrespective of creedal origin, and aid the cause of religion without proselyting for any particular sect."[36] The motto certainly made good business sense, allowing Exman and Harpers to find and develop books that would sell "irrespective of creedal origin," but the mission of Exman's department also reflected his personal commitment to "search for reality wherever it may be found." This combination of good business sense and an earnest "search for reality" drove his openness to the bestselling authors that made Harpers such a success in religious publishing in the 1930s and for decades afterwards.

Harry Emerson Fosdick's *As I See Religion* (1932)

The most influential author Exman shepherded into print was his own pastor, Harry Emerson Fosdick of the Riverside Church in New York. Professor at Union Theological Seminary and author of many popular books since the 1910s, Fosdick had gained the national spotlight with his 1922 sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" which directly challenged what he perceived as the growing threat of fundamentalism to progressive religion. Fosdick's passionate and articulate defense of a modern, liberal faith won him the support of liberal Protestantism's greatest champion in 1920s America, John

[36] Exman, *House of Harper*, 287-288.

D. Rockefeller, Jr.[37] Rockefeller actively supported Fosdick for the remainder of his career, most notably by building for him the grand Protestant cathedral on Manhattan's Morningside Heights, the Riverside Church. Since 1927, Fosdick had been America's foremost preacher, due to his prominent pulpit at Riverside and his hugely successful "National Vespers" show on WJZ, a New York radio station that was carried nationally on the NBC network.[38]

Fosdick published his early bestsellers—including *Manhood of the Master* (1913), *The Meaning of Prayer* (1916), *The Meaning of Faith* (1918), and *The Meaning of Service* (1920)—with the Association Press, and his bestseller of the 1920s, *Twelve Test of Character* (1923), with George H. Doran. But after Exman arrived in New York in 1928, Harper & Brothers published all of Fosdick's prodigious output for the remainder of his career, including many volumes of sermons and the national bestsellers *As I See Religion* (1932) and *On Being a Real Person* (1943). Over the years the association of Exman and Fosdick developed into a warm friendship. Exman was an active member of Fosdick's Riverside Church from 1929 on, serving on numerous boards and committees, and the two worked together on a number of civic projects in addition to their relationship as author and editor. "You are not only my publisher," Fosdick told Exman after years of productive

[37] On Rockefeller's religious philanthropy, see Albert F. Schenkel, *The Rich Man and the Kingdom: John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and the Protestant Establishment* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

[38] On Fosdick, see Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Pastor, Preacher, Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). For an early profile of Fosdick, see Lurton Blassingame, "A Twentieth Century Puritan," *The New Yorker*, June 18, 1927, 18-20.

collaboration, "but my friend, and you have displayed that fact in many ways."[39] Fosdick considered Exman his "guide, philosopher, and friend in the realm of publishing" and he extolled Harper & Brothers for its "notable contribution to the religious literature of the English-speaking world," for which, he was happy to say, a "large a share of the credit . . . goes to Mr. Exman."[40] Fosdick and Exman worked well together in large part because of their shared formation in liberal Protestantism and their shared commitment to free spiritual exploration.

As I See Religion, Fosdick's 1932 bestseller with Harpers, arose from his ministry at Riverside Church and his ardent defense of religious liberalism, and in many ways paralleled his work with the Religious Book Club. In fact, the book reads, more than anything else, like a manifesto for the Religious Book Club and the Harpers religion department. In this book, which received wide attention in both the mainstream and the religious press when it appeared, Fosdick articulated an interpretation of religion deeply indebted to William James, a view that positioned religious experience, rather than church life, creeds, or systematic theology, at the center of religious life. Fosdick's work, in this way, perfectly captured the mood of many modern Americans in the dark years of the early 1930s, disenchanted with the churches yet still yearning for religious meaning.

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[39] Harry Emerson Fosdick to Eugene Exman, March 6, 1947. Series 2b, Box 3, Folder 2, Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers, the Burke Library archives at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

[40] Harry Emerson Fosdick to Eugene Exman, March 25, 1947. Series 2a, Box 3, Folder 13, Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers, the Burke Library archives at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York; Harry Emerson Fosdick to Fred C. Baker, March 19, 1953. Series 2a, Box 3, Folder 13, Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers, the Burke Library archives at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

As a popularization of Jamesian categories of religious understanding, *As I See Religion* followed in the footsteps of a number of previous texts, including Rufus Jones's *Social Law in the Spiritual World* (1904), Harold Begbie's *Twice-Born Men* (1909), and Dr. Richard Cabot's *What Men Live By* (1914). Fosdick's debt to William James matched that of Exman, and their shared religious sensibility formed the basis for their enduring relationship as pastor-parishioner, editor-author, and friends.

Fosdick's account of authentic faith presented serious challenges to American Christians, however, and in Fosdick's first chapter he addressed the foremost of these challenges: simply put, in the words of his opening chapter title, "What is Religion?" The continual expansion of boundaries threatened the entire enterprise of institutional religion, and the matter of definition that had plagued scholars of comparative religion and promoters of religious reading now confronted Fosdick. "With widening horizons," Fosdick wrote in the book's opening lines, "religion has become ambiguous. It includes Christ and Buddha, Lao-tse and Mary Baker G. Eddy. It takes in polytheist, monotheist, and humanist. Bishop Manning, Billy Sunday, Gandhi, Professor Whitehead . . . are all religious."[41] Fosdick, of course, advocated such widened horizons himself as an editor of the Religious Book Club, and now in this popular account of the nature of religion he sought to help modern Americans find their way in such confusing times.

In the mystical communion of the individual and the Eternal, a union that occurred in consciousness and therefore psychologically, Fosdick located the very essence of religion. Fosdick's work in this way revealed the influence of James and Jones, yet he

[41] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 1.

moved beyond their pronouncements by offering the first truly popular work of religious inspiration to place the union of psychology and mysticism at the center of religious life. According to historians Louis Schneider and Sanford M. Dornbusch, *As I See Religion* was the first book in America to make the case for "psychology as an aid to man's attaining something like salvation in *this* life. . . ."[42] Even more, Fosdick argued, echoing the mystics as much as the scientists, religion "cannot be essentially described in terms of its temporary clothes, its churches, and its creeds. Religion at its fountain-head is an individual, psychological experience."[43] Mystical and psychological approaches to religious experience often blended together in early-twentieth-century liberalism, as Fosdick's formulation clearly reveals, yet Fosdick offered the deft touch of a skilled rhetorician, and a man thoroughly acquainted with the mass marketplace, to bring this message to the public in a compelling package.

Fosdick's answers to the problems modern life presented to religion came in a series of typically learned essays; his book even included endnotes, a true rarity among popular religious writings. Nevertheless, as a writer committed to reaching a mass audience, he was quick to distance his endeavor from the work of formal theologians and social scientists, noting that when "the intelligentsia try to clarify this situation by their definitions they only confound it the more. If anyone, confused about religion's meaning, wishes to make his bewilderment more complete, let him become a connoisseur in

[42] Louis Schneider and Sanford M. Dornbusch, *Popular Religion: Inspirational Books in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 26.
[43] Harry Emerson Fosdick, *As I See Religion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932), 6.

definitions of religion."[44] The effort to bolster religion either through social scientific exactitude or dogmatic syntheses Fosdick considered "senile," since these efforts were attempts to resuscitate a dying tradition rather than search for continued relevance. "Our real task," he posed by contrast, "is to achieve a religion which saves people," and such religion must begin with the "inward communion from which come peace and power. . . . No one who has followed the work of religious psychology from William James to Starbuck and Coe," he asserted, "will doubt the reality of such experiences."[45] Unfortunately, thought Fosdick, the leader of the most prominent congregation in the nation, "The present churches and the present theologies have too little to do with this saving experience. . . . [A] great deal of this vital religious experience has already fled from the churches and shaken off the dust of orthodoxy in order to get air to breathe and room to move about in."[46] Fosdick's work with the Religious Book Club, and Exman's in the religion department at Harpers, offered readers just such "air to breathe" free from the "dust of orthodoxy," and *As I See Religion* served as a theological rationale for precisely these kinds of endeavors.

Fosdick's approach, however, for all its focus on personal religious experience, was not simply to reduce religion to individual religious experience and leave it at that. For all his polemics against stale orthodoxy, Fosdick was a vigorous defender of religion in general and Christianity—at least as he framed it—in particular. In fact, one of the remarkable contributions of *As I See Religion* was Fosdick's respectful, smart, and sensitive

[44] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 2.
[45] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 9, 17.
[46] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 21.

rejoinder to those loud voices in interwar America denouncing all forms of faith. In good middlebrow fashion, Fosdick used his popular book to introduce his readers to the ideas of critics such as Walter Lippmann, Bertrand Russell, Joseph Wood Krutch, and Sigmund Freud, devoting more than a third of the text to an explication of their ideas about faith, God, humanism, and atheism. He began, as good debaters do, by conceding the many valuable contributions of his interlocutors. "Anyone acquainted with even the environs of modern psychiatry," Fosdick readily admitted, "knows that not only religious imagination but every other function of the human mind is commonly used as a means of substituting desire for reality."[47] Bertrand Russell, Fosdick forthrightly acknowledged of the world's most renowned atheist, certainly "cannot be accused of fooling himself with desirable optimisms" while humanists such as Lippmann and Krutch had shown convincingly, he maintained, that "ethics can exist without religion. . . ."[48] Indeed, Fosdick concluded, "[r]eligion in America does desperately need to be humanized," and if he himself were to lose faith in God, he affirmed, "undoubtedly I should try to be a humanist."[49] Humanism, Fosdick saw, might help liberate the churches from their petty obsessions and obsolete supernaturalism, and restore in religion "a real and inward worship of the Divine made concrete in an experience of goodness, truth, or beauty. . . ."[50] Yet, for all his honest and effective concessions to the contributions of the humanists,

[47] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 100.
[48] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 68, 75.
[49] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 81, 92.
[50] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 82.

Fosdick nevertheless mounted a resolute defense of faith in God, and of Christian faith in particular.

Fosdick chose to stand his ground on the matters of beauty and personality, matters he considered central to the meaning of human existence, and matters about which, he believed, humanism could offer no adequate account. Modern science, he contended, had rendered a service to religion "beyond all computation," for it had "calcined old fables and cleaned up a mess of rubbish in religious tradition," yet when science became the ultimate yardstick of truth it greatly diminished the scope of human understanding, for "the loveliest things in human experience are not adequately covered by the word 'scientific.'"[51] This assessment of science, Fosdick asserted, was not a retreat from the search for truth but an affirmation that in beauty resides higher truth, since "as always, beauty will prove to be timeless and when Einstein is as outmoded as Ptolemy this native speech of religion will still be the language of the soul."[52] "[B]eauty subdues, integrates, and unifies the soul, washes the spirit clean, and sends one out with a vision of the Divine, not simply believed in but made vivid," he poetically concluded.[53] Just as music or art cannot be reduced to the wavelengths of sound or light, so also, Fosdick maintained, religious faith must not be equated with the findings of sociological or psychological science or the pronouncements of systematic theology.

Fosdick's mystical vision of the life of the soul, transcending the material, the scientific, and the dogmatic, and finding God in the beautiful, proved a powerful

[51] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 131.
[52] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 139.
[53] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 136.

conception at the depth of the Depression, when large impersonal forces were shaping so much of life, and faith in technocratically engineered progress had crumbled. Fosdick clearly understood the implications of his thought and the outrage it would spark from critics. He freely admitted the "vagueness of all this, its disembodied churchlessness and its intellectual vacuity," yet he found greater danger in the alternatives. "[R]igid definitions of reality are insufficient," he asserted by way of rebuttal, and any "adequate thinking must have fringes . . . . [T]heological dogmatism has nearly been the death of religion, and only by outgrowing its strangling constrictions has religion managed to survive."[54] When faced with the choice between the vaguely mystical and the narrowly rational, Fosdick chose the mystical, content in the conviction that authentic experience rather than inherited certainty remained the higher spiritual calling.

Indeed, for Fosdick, beauty itself only mattered as it served the end of human intimacy with the divine. The greatest beauty and the highest truth in all of creation, therefore, was the mystery of our individual consciousness that allowed us to apprehend divine beauty and truth. For this Fosdick used the term "personality," a term that meant both individual human particularity and what later thinkers might call personhood. The special contribution of Christianity, Fosdick maintained, was not in its dogma or creeds, which any sophisticated study of comparative religions would reveal had clear cognates in other traditions of faith. "The genius of Christianity," he claimed, "lies in reverence for personality."[55] Fosdick approvingly cited Emerson's claim about Jesus—"Alone in all of

[54] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 150-151.
[55] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 40.

history he estimated the greatness of man"—and asserted that from Christianity's affirmation of the "divine origin, spiritual nature, infinite worth, and endless possibilities" of human personality flowed both mystical rapport with the divine and the ethical imperatives of human society.[56] Jesus, according to Fosdick, "came at the matter" of personality "not theoretically, but practically. . . . His major parables concern the treatment of humans."[57] Regardless of the accuracy of Fosdick's claims of Christian distinctiveness, his core mystical and psychological affirmations, affirmations about the centrality of beauty and human personhood to authentic religious life, functioned as highly perceptive critiques of the spiritual crisis engendered by life in mass consumer society, especially a society in such evident crisis.

These ideas were not original to Fosdick, though he proved to be their most able popularizer. Fosdick's mentor in mysticism had been Rufus Jones, whose *Social Law in the Spiritual World* (1904) had especially impressed the young Fosdick.[58] From Jones, Fosdick learned especially of the social and ethical aspects of mystical experience. Jones also asserted, and Fosdick agreed, that mystical experience was not for the privileged few—it was democratic. Jones's Jamesian theology—he at one point defined mystical experience as "consciousness of direct and immediate relationship with some transcendent reality

[56] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 49, 44.
[57] Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 51.
[58] Fosdick's account of his early reading of Jones's *Social Law in the Spiritual World* is further discussed in the Prologue. See also Matthew S. Hedstrom, "Rufus Jones and Mysticism for the Masses," *CrossCurrents* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 31-44.

which, in the moment of experience, is believed to be God."[59]—made mystical experience accessible to those of almost any theological orientation. Likewise, in *Spiritual Energies* in 1922, Jones contended, "We assume that [mysticism] is for saints or apostles, but not for common every-day people like ourselves. Well, that is where we are wrong."[60] Fosdick followed Jones as a mystical egalitarian, and in *As I See Religion* he presented a clear and accessible vision of the religious life rooted in mystical awareness of the beauty and truth of the divine, a reverence for human personality, and a commitment to the social and ethical implications of authentic religious experience. Fosdick's vision of the religious life—freed from churches, theologies, or creeds, and available to all, not only the spiritual virtuosi—represented a theology for the culture of seeking, a culture embodied by the practices of religious middlebrow reading.

A new book from Harry Emerson Fosdick was an event in American culture in the interwar years, and *As I See Religion* garnered significant attention from both the secular and religious press when it appeared. The *New York Herald Tribune* wrote approvingly of Fosdick's liberalism. Fosdick's audience of "thinking people, well read people, educated people," the review declared, "do not want to scrap religion for the fun of getting rid of it. They would prefer to keep it if it could be fitted into their concepts of the world we live in."[61] *The New York Times* wrote that Fosdick's book "may be read by the freethinker without danger of contamination" because it is "a book to make people

[59] Rufus M. Jones, "The Mystic's Experience of God," *The Atlantic Monthly,* November 1921, 638.
[60] Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Energies in Daily Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), xi.
[61] R. Townsend Seashaw, "Dr. Fosdick to His Critics," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 15, 1932.

think, not a book to tell them what to think."[62] Even the tiny *News Journal* from Murfreesboro, Tennessee, took note; as its reviewer declared: "I think I've read no book on religious philosophy in my life that seems so sane, so intelligent, as this book by Fosdick."[63]

Fosdick's fellow religious liberals, not surprisingly, were overwhelmingly pleased with the work, but even some more conservative Protestants found valuable contributions in the book. The Religious Book Club, which had a policy against recommending the books of editorial committee members as main selections, chose Fosdick's work as an alternate, declaring its conclusions to be "positive, constructive, invigorating."[64] Exman personally sent the review in the *Christian Century*, the leading journal of ecumenical liberalism, to Fosdick. The *Christian Century* noted with admiration that the book's argument "was not stated in the jargon approved by academic conventions" and yet managed to address "squarely the religious issues which multitudes of intelligent people are now facing."[65] Other critics picked up on the book's appeal to a mass audience while remaining intellectual substantive, such as the reviewer in *World Tomorrow*, who recommended the book for its "intellectual robustness, spiritual insight and knowledge of personality," presented in "an English style that is a rare instrument of strength and

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[62] "Religion Is an Art to Dr. Fosdick," *The New York Time Book Review*, May 1, 1932, 2.
[63] Review of *As I See Religion*, in "I've Been Reading" column, *News Journal* (Murfreesboro, TN), August 27, 1932.
[64] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, May 1932.
[65] Justin Wroe Nixon, "Dr. Fosdick's Distinctive Service," *Christian Century*, June 22, 1932, 33-34.

beauty. . . ."[66] Even the critic in the Calvinist *Reformed Church Messenger* was largely enthusiastic. The book rendered a valuable service, this review noted, to "those who, in the confused welter of modern thought . . . have lost all faith both in God and themselves." Though the reviewer hoped readers "might eventually discover that there is more in Christianity than Dr. Fosdick gives us," he ultimately declared it "a brilliant book."

Reviews in the secular and religious press provide one measure of the resonance *As I See Religion* found at the depth of the Depression. But Fosdick did not write for his colleagues or his critics. Above all else he was a pastor, and he wrote his books as extensions of his ministry, to reach ordinary Americans. Over his long career Fosdick received a tremendous number of letters from those who read of his books and columns and listened to his radio preaching, and certainly thousands of these letters came in response to *As I See Religion*. Sadly, all of this correspondence from readers and listeners in the 1920s and 1930s was destroyed, though his staff did transcribe brief summaries of many of them. A woman from Greenville, Mississippi, for example, apparently wrote to Fosdick to inform him of the joy the book had provided her, and to tell him it had changed her thinking about both God and her fellow men and women. Specifically, she noted that, with the insights Fosdick provided, she had overcome the racial prejudice she had previously felt, and was now teaching others to do the same.[67] Fosdick was a polarizing figure in American religious life, and for every reader such as this his book

[66] H.E.L., "Religion through Fosdick's Eyes," *World Tomorrow*, October 19, 1932.
[67] From summary of destroyed letters. Mrs. F. W. Norwood to Harry Emerson Fosdick, November 5, 1936. Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers, The Riverside Church, New York.

undoubtedly generated an equally vociferous critic. Indeed, for all his talk of transcending orthodoxy, Fosdick's brand of liberalism constituted its own form of orthodoxy, maintained with the same partisan loyalty as that of his fundamentalist antagonists. Rather than the resolution of controversy, *As I See Religion* stands as a testament to it, and perhaps the clearest testament of the culture of seeking that emerged from liberal Protestantism and was promulgated so effectively through the mechanisms of mass-market reading.

Emmet Fox and Glenn Clark: New Thought for a Depression Audience

In Fosdick's *As I See Religion* Exman published the work of his own pastor, who represented some of the most influential institutions in American Christianity—Riverside Church and Union Theological Seminary. Yet Exman also used his position at Harpers to nurture and promote other widely popular books in the 1930s, books that arose from other strands of the American religious tapestry. Most notable among Exman's other bestsellers during the Depression were the positive-thinking works of Emmet Fox and Glenn Clark. These books, though in the broad family of liberal religious thought, deviated significantly from Fosdick's brand of liberal Protestantism. Historian Donald Meyer concludes of Fosdick that while he gave "a somewhat more positive assurance than did James that objective spiritual power did exist," nevertheless, "he like James was repelled by any wish that this objective power take care of everything."[68] Not so Emmet

[68] Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: Religion as Pop Psychology From Mary Baker Eddy to Oral Roberts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 219.

Fox and Glenn Clark. Fosdick stood in the tradition of William James and Rufus Jones, but Fox and Clark followed more closely the trail blazed by Phineas Quimby, Mary Baker Eddy, and Ralph Waldo Trine. James had been fascinated by such figures, the progenitors of the "religion of healthy-mindedness," and even admired them in many ways, but was never able to count himself among them. Fosdick and Exman, each of whom had suffered youthful religious ecstasy and despair, likewise rejected mind cure as untenable. And yet the Religious Book Club recommended the works of Clark, the less extreme of the two, and Exman happily published them both. Emmet Fox, in fact, became Exman's bestselling author of the 1930s, producing the most successful works of positive thinking in American culture in the half-century between Ralph Waldo Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite* (1897) and Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). In Fosdick's work Exman had found his manifesto, and in publishing and promoting the works of Fox and Clark he put that manifesto into practice.

Emmet Fox was a New Thought superstar. In the depths of the Depression he held spellbound the throngs at his Church of the Healing Christ in New York City, which outgrew venue after venue: first the ballroom at the Astor Hotel, then the Hippodrome just off Times Square and the Manhattan Opera House, which seated four thousand, and finally Carnegie Hall, where he addressed crowds of six thousand. An electrical engineer by training, "sensitive and delicate in appearance," according to a biographer, Fox commanded the rapt attention of the largest positive-thinking congregation in the world

with a preaching style that was "quiet and thoughtful, simple and direct."[69] Born in Ireland in 1886, Fox became convinced as a child that he held special healing powers, even wondering at times if he might perhaps be a saint. After reading mind-cure literature as a teenager, he determined, rather, that he simply possessed an intuitive understanding of natural spiritual law. Though he eventually studied engineering, and worked professionally in that field in England, Fox never lost his interest in New Thought (called Higher Thought in England), reading widely and attending lectures and conferences throughout his twenties and thirties. He gave his first public lecture in metaphysics in London in 1928, and soon was touring widely across England and Scotland. In 1930 he moved to New York—to the Astor Hotel, his home for twenty years—and began giving talks in auditoriums, lecture halls, and hotel ballrooms around the city. He quickly received ordination through the College of Divine Science in Denver, and before long emerged as one of the most successful preachers in the country.

As soon as Fox became a preaching sensation, he produced a bestseller for Harpers. In 1932, only two years after arriving in New York, and a year after his appointment as the pastor of the Church of the Healing Christ—an established congregation affiliated with the Divine Science branch of the American New Thought movement—Fox compiled a collection of his sermons and essays into a book called *Power*

[69] Harry Gaze, *Emmet Fox: The Man and His Work* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 98; Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 51. On Fox, see also his obituary, "Dr. Emmet Fox," *The New York Times*, August 18, 1951, 11; and Robert Myron Coates, "Blue Flame on the Forehead," *The New Yorker*, September 11, 1943, 58. Gaze was a New Thought preacher and friend of Fox.

through Constructive Thinking. He eventually published five bestsellers with Exman at Harpers, including a tremendously influential New Thought analysis of the teachings of Jesus called *The Sermon on the Mount* (1934), but in *Power through Constructive Thinking* Fox outlined his philosophy most directly. This book went through eight printings by 1940, reaching hundreds of thousands of readers with a wildly eclectic mix of New Thought, transcendentalism, Christianity, Hinduism, and a variety of other metaphysical teachings. Like Fosdick, indeed like all those who served as successful experts in religious middlebrow culture, Fox understood the anxieties engendered by modern American life. "So many schools of thought seem to be competing for the attention of the student," he wrote in *Power through Constructive Thinking*, "so busy is the printing press; so many new books and pamphlets are written; so many magazines come and go; that people have told me that they have felt quite in despair of ever discovering what it really is that they must do to be saved."[70] In a book that covered the Lord's Prayer and the Yoga of Love, the Bible and the Law of Karma, The Seven Day Mental Diet, The Garden of Allah, The Golden Key, and Reincarnation, Fox proposed to guide his readers through this welter of confusion and reveal the true secrets of spiritual knowledge.

The book proved a great success, and the secret of its success lay in the forceful clarity with which Fox articulated his ideas. His central contention, as with all New Thought proponents, was that the spiritual world, just like the natural, operated according to identifiable laws, and that those laws, through a kind of gnostic insight, were knowable to those able and willing to see. "The universe operates strictly in accordance

[70] Emmet Fox, *Power through Constructive Thinking* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932).

with Law," Fox wrote, "for God, among other things, is Principle, or Law. . . ."[71] A harmonious, happy, and healthy life resulted from knowledge of these laws, and Fox proclaimed that "mystic power" can "impart new and wonderful kinds of knowledge as soon as you really want such knowledge—glorious knowledge—strange things not taught in schools or written in books."[72] The key to unlocking such hidden knowledge was the "Golden Key" of "scientific prayer." Modern psychology, Fox believed, offered valuable tools in the science of the spirit, and might aid in the pursuit of knowledge, but ultimately psychology simply reaffirmed the eternal truths of the wisdom traditions. "The great Illumined Ones who wrote the Bible under Divine inspiration well knew all the teaching of modern psychology," Fox asserted. "The ideas concerning the subconscious mind and the part it plays in our scheme of things, which have lately been put forward by investigators like Freud and Jung and others, novel though they appear to the modern world, were all quite familiar to the great Initiates of the Bible. . . ."[73] In these pronouncements, Fox stood squarely in the New Thought tradition that had a long history in American religious life by the 1930s.

Yet Fox demonstrated a more voracious spiritual eclecticism than was typical even among his rather freethinking forbears in the New Thought tradition. Though he produced widely read commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount and the Ten Commandments, Fox also aggressively appropriated ideas from a vast array of spiritual

[71] Fox, *Power through Constructive Thinking*, 171.
[72] Fox, *Power through Constructive Thinking*, 2.
[73] Fox, *Power through Constructive Thinking*, 64.

and metaphysical traditions.[74] Sometimes his borrowings were more linguistic than substantive, such as when he used the phrase "The Yoga of Love" to describe his notions of "the true Christian idea of Love." In other areas, however, especially in matters of death and the afterlife, Fox ventured deeply into what was for most Americans uncharted territory. He taught reincarnation, for example, with the idea that the purpose of human existence was to gain complete spiritual understanding, a processes that might take more than one lifetime. He also taught the Law of Karma, a borrowing from Hindu and Buddhist traditions that had entered Anglo-American New Thought through transcendentalism and Theosophy. Fox claimed evidence for his teachings on karma and reincarnation from the Bible, but readily acknowledged in *Power through Constructive Thinking* that such ideas had long and fruitful histories of exposition in the religious traditions of the East.

Regardless of the extent of his spiritual borrowings, all his teaching, like his teaching on reincarnation, returned to the core affirmation of right thinking as the key to spiritual success, health, and happiness. Such notions drew from the deep well of Anglo-American New Thought, and from this mind-cure tradition Fox also knew that harnessing the power of right thinking required a careful attention to technique, which he called "treatments." For Fox, the most critical kind of treatment was right reading, and here he sounded much like the evangelical exponents of reading in the nineteenth

[74] Emmet Fox, *The Sermon on the Mount: A General Introduction to Scientific Christianity in the Form of a Spiritual Key to Matthew V, VI, and VII* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934); Emmet Fox, *The Ten Commandments: The Master Key to Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953).

century, and indeed like centuries of Christian advisors on proper spiritual reading. "The mistake made by many people, when things go wrong," he taught, "is to skim through book after book, without getting anywhere."[75] Rather, he counseled, one ought to read slowly and meditatively. When reading a Psalm, for example, Fox proclaimed, "it is of very little use merely to read one of them through hurriedly and then put it aside. A Treatment such as [a] Psalm should be read over slowly many times. As you read, you should pause frequently to become receptive for a moment in order to give a chance for inspiration to come through."[76] While the Bible, as a unique book in human history, what he called "a spiritual vortex through which spiritual power pours from heaven to earth," offered the best material for such reading, Fox also advocated "[t]he reading of a page of any spiritual book that appeals to you. . . ."[77]

This eclectic and adventurous program of spiritual reading was precisely the agenda that Exman had outlined for the religion department at Harpers, and that the Religious Book Club advanced through its wide-ranging recommendations. None of Fox's books were carried by the Religious Book Club or chosen by the selection committee of the Religious Books Round Table, indicating that his teaching had crossed some boundary of taste, erudition, or spiritual acceptability to these quarters of the Protestant cultural elite. Nevertheless, Exman aggressively promoted Fox's books, lavishing Fox's various bestsellers with extensive advertising. Furthermore, Exman ensured that *Power through Constructive Thinking* was carried at leading bookstores across the

[75] Fox, *Power through Constructive Thinking*, 136.
[76] Fox, *Power through Constructive Thinking*, 99.
[77] Fox, *Power through Constructive Thinking*, 2, 113.

country. Harper & Brothers records indicate that the title was featured in general trade and department store bookstores, such as Brentano's in Washington, DC; Carson, Pirie, Scott in Chicago; Dayton's in Minneapolis; and Wanamaker's in Philadelphia, among many others. But more significantly, Harpers sold Fox's bestseller through Methodist Book Concern outlets in Chicago, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Boston, and Philadelphia as well as in the Presbyterian Bookstore in Chicago, the American Baptist Publication Society in Kansas City, and the Episcopal Book Shop in Detroit.[78] Fox may not have passed muster with the brokers of religious reading at the Religious Book Club or the American Library Association, but in the more worldly world of book publishing and bookselling his writings were eagerly embraced.

For all the commercial success of Fox's bestsellers at Harpers, these books may not have been his most significant contribution to American religious life. His most lasting influence, almost certainly, was through Alcoholics Anonymous, which was just getting organized in New York City in the mid-1930s. The founders of AA drew substantially on the writings of Emmet Fox in their early work, and eventually produced a seminal text in the history of American spirituality, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, more commonly known as the "Big Book." One of the first alcoholics that Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA, worked with in the early years of his recovery ministry, in fact—even before the formal establishment of Alcoholics Anonymous—was a man named Al Steckman, whose mother

[78] Untitled list of booksellers. Box 99, Harper & Brothers Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

was Emmet Fox's secretary.[79] In addition to this personal connection, five of the accounts depicted in the Big Book, according to one historian of the movement, were of drunks who had overcome their addiction through the help of Fox's writings. Harry Emerson Fosdick and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. became early supporters of Bill Wilson's efforts, and through Fosdick and Rockefeller, and because of the connections with Emmet Fox as well, Exman was also drawn early on into the circle of Wilson and Alcoholics Anonymous.[80]

In May 1938, Wilson, sober only three and a half years, began writing what would the next spring appear as *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the famous "Big Book" that first introduced the twelve steps to the world. In 1932 Exman had published *For Sinners Only*, the highly successful collection of conversion narratives from the Oxford Group, an evangelical organization that had greatly influenced Wilson.[81] Because of this earlier connection, and because of the mutual personal ties to Fosdick and Rockefeller, Wilson came to Exman for editorial guidance soon after he began drafting his book. Exman offered Wilson a $1,500 advance based only on incomplete rough drafts, recognizing immediately the valuable contribution and commercial possibilities of the work. Eventually, Wilson decided to form Alcoholics Anonymous, Inc., and self-publish the Big Book, in order to

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[79] Igor I. Sikorsky, Jr., *AA's Godparents: Three Early Influences on Alcoholics Anonymous and Its Foundation: Carl Jung, Emmet Fox, Jack Alexander* (Minneapolis: CompCare Publishers, 1990), 19.

[80] See Susan Cheever, *Bill Wilson: His Life and the Creation of Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 149-153. See also "The Book" in Mitchell K., *How it Worked: The Story of Clarence H. Snyder and the Early Days of Alcoholics Anonymous in Cleveland, Ohio* (Washingtonville, NY: AA Big Book Study Group, 1999).

[81] This information comes through private correspondence with Trysh Travis.

control the promotion, and the profits, from the book more directly. Exman supported, even encouraged, this move, and remained a backer and friend to AA over the years. He eventually edited *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (1953), a significant follow-up to *Alcoholics Anonymous*, exploring in greater depth each of the twelve steps. Even years later, Exman still considered AA "the most exciting modern movement in religion" and *Alcoholics Anonymous* "the best modern testimony I know of the power of religion to save sinners." "[R]eligion, medicine, and psychology," Exman declared "have together diagnosed the disease and provided a cure. These men and women of AA have been deeply moved by a religious experience."[82] That religious experience came in part through the writings of Emmet Fox, writings that Harpers, because of Exman's commitment to free spiritual exploration, had brought to the world.

Glenn Clark, in his books with Harpers, followed this same line from Emmet Fox and AA, focusing primarily on prayer and bodily health. Though both less successful and less radical than Fox, Clark nevertheless represented a significant voice of positive-thinking spirituality in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. A football and track coach at Macalester College in Minneapolis, as well as Professor of Creative Religious Living, Clark wrote two books that became Harpers bestsellers, *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes* (1937) and *How to Find Health through Prayer* (1940).[83] Clark's writings, especially on prayer, relied extensively on mind-cure principles, yet he remained throughout his career more

[82] Exman, "Reading, Writing, and Religion," 87.
[83] Glenn Clark, *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937) and *How to Find Health through Prayer* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940). The following citations are from a single-volume edition of these works published cooperatively between Harpers and Guideposts.

acceptable than Fox to liberal Protestant leaders such as Fosdick and Rufus Jones, and to liberal Protestant institutions such as the Religious Book Club. The Religious Book Club, as we have seen, recommended *How to Find Health through Prayer*, though with some reservations. Similarly, Exman recruited Jones as a reader for a Clark manuscript in 1945, and though he considered the book, soon published as *The Way, the Truth, and the Life* (1946), to be "decidedly lacking in scholarly insight" and often "far-fetched and forced," Jones nevertheless recommended the book for publication because "the reader who wants an uplifting spiritual message will get it."[84] Clark, after all, never ventured into realms such as karma and reincarnation that so clearly marked Fox as a more significant innovator, and so he became an advocate for positive-thinking from within the broad compass of liberal Protestantism, rather than, like Fox, a voice from without. Clark's writings, and the summer camps he founded, which he called "Camps Farthest Out," became for these reasons a significant conduit for the introduction of New Thought teachings into mainline liberal Protestantism, especially since he himself remained a lifelong Presbyterian.

Clark, like Fox, stressed the critical power of right thinking, especially the need to affirm the positive and squelch the negative. He had come to his own realizations about the power of mind during 1918 and 1919, in the wake of the World War and in the midst

[84] Rufus M. Jones to Eugene Exman, July 31, 1945. Box 85, Harper & Brothers Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Clark, Jones, and other well-known leaders in prayer and mystical spirituality, such as Frank Laubach, E. Stanley Jones, and Howard Thurman, collaborated on a series of prayer meetings during World War II, out of which they produced the collection of essays published as Rufus M. Jones, ed., *Together: A Book by Twelve Men* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946).

of the global influenza pandemic, a period in his own life that also witnessed the birth of his son and the death of his father. "The secrets of the mighty works of Jesus," Clark realized while on the train to see his dying father, "lay in the fact that he give himself in totality and entirety to the Father—his front mind, his subconscious mind, his unconscious mind, his entire mind."[85] This insight set Clark on a course of intense reading in American and English metaphysical writings. Clark first expounded on his newfound spiritual understanding in the 1925 bestseller *The Soul's Sincere Desire*, a book that, among other things, discussed the parables of Jesus as model for prayer, and then spun its own parables through extend analogies involving golf.[86] Clark's most far-reaching and influential statement, however, came in *How to Find Health through Prayer*, which has become a *locus classicus*, along with the writings of Mary Baker Eddy, for positive-thinking teachings regarding the body. "Today we are on the very brink of discovering," Clark claimed, "the secret of that Elixir of Life that Ponce de Leon and all those earlier seekers . . . failed so miserably to discover."[87] That secret, of course, was right thinking and proper prayer.

To effect this seemingly miraculous power of healing, Clark offered a series of clear techniques and affirmations, but with a measure of nuance that allowed his work greater acceptability among his fellow liberal Protestants than was afforded the writings of Emmet Fox. Clark never equated illness with sin, for example, but only more narrowly

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[85] Glenn Clark, *A Man's Reach: The Autobiography of Glenn Clark* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 151-197.
[86] Glenn Clark, *The Soul's Sincere Desire* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1925).
[87] Clark, *How to Find Health through Prayer*, 2.

with poor habits of mind. Sickness, he declared, building on an analogy to telephone transmission, "is merely a vibration set up in the sensitive responses of our marvelously responsive body, which will cease as soon as we reverently put the receiver to our ear and promise to obey the command that is being sent."[88] The "spiritually minded," those "most responsive to . . . vibration," he contended, were "the quickest to catch the reaction called illness."[89] Clark catalogued a very specific list of ailments and the ways sufferers evidently failed to respond to the spiritual commands being sent. Heart ailments, for example, might be relieved through the practice of forgiveness, whereas arthritis, for Clark, stemmed from rigidity of character, "our attempt to achieve too definite and perfect results in too short time."[90] In this same psychosomatic vein, Clark declared, "Holding back ideas, or failure to express them, due to shyness, diffidence, or undue secretiveness tends to cause constipation."[91] Most astonishingly, and least subtly, Clark declared, "when respiratory infections become very dangerous, as the Spanish influenza did during the World War . . . it is due, I contend, to a great inflooding of wrong thinking and wrong feeling of entire nations."[92] Whether for extreme instances such a this, or in the more mundane matter of minor ailments, Clark proclaimed a series of simple affirmative strategies to right what was wrong; he called these "deny it away," "laugh it away," "relinquish it away," and "know it away," and each involved positive thoughts,

[88] Clark, *How to Find Health through Prayer*, 32.
[89] Clark, *How to Find Health through Prayer*, 52.
[90] Clark, *How to Find Health through Prayer*, 36.
[91] Clark, *How to Find Health through Prayer*, 39.
[92] Clark, *How to Find Health through Prayer*, 45.

prayer, and directed Scripture reading.[93] The short book concluded with an appendix of Bible verses and meditations appropriate for the treatment of a variety of specific illnesses.

The bestsellers of Fox and Clark, along with the work from Fosdick, helped the religion department at Harpers survive the Depression, and even flourish, while other houses floundered. Exman's agenda to "aid the cause of religion without proselyting for any particular sect" resulted in an openness to spiritual innovation that served the department well in the mass marketplace. With an emerging culture of religious expertise available to guide readers in their reading choices and practices, firms like Harpers were free to pursue commercial success without fear of spiritual malpractice. In this way, the middlebrow and the marketplace together forged a culture of spiritual exploration through reading. As it turns out, Eugene Exman was soon to become the living embodiment of that culture. After a period of doubt brought on by his graduate training at Chicago, Exman at mid-life rediscovered the religious sensibility of his youth.

Eugene Exman: Bookman as Seeker

Exman guided the religion department at Harpers through the difficult years of the Depression, enlarging its catalogue and producing a series of highly successful works. As the Depression abated and the nation mobilized for war in the early 1940s, Exman himself underwent another significant transformation. From this point forward, the divinity school graduate and Riverside Church member who led the most prestigious and productive major religious publishing department of the period embarked on a brave,

[93] Clark, *How to Find Health through Prayer*, 72.

ambitious, and far-reaching spiritual quest, even while editing the works of some of the most significant Christian thinkers and activists of the twentieth century. Exman's personal journey—which requires a brief look ahead, into the 1940s and 1950s—provides an instructive instance of the intertwining of liberal Protestantism, the culture of religious reading, and free-ranging spiritual seeking in the mid-twentieth century. Significantly, the groundwork for Exman's journey was laid in the culture of religious reading he did so much to build in the 1930s.

In early January of 1941, the forty-year-old Exman wrote to one of his authors, the Quaker mystic and Haverford College professor Thomas Kelly, about Kelly's forthcoming book. "An enforced stay at home in bed has made it possible to read the pamphlets that you forwarded," Exman began, referring to the essays that would form the basis for Kelly's *A Testament to Devotion*, soon hailed a spiritual masterpiece. "I've been moved much by what you have written here; I've been [led] recently to enlarge my own spirituality so you were speaking not to an editor, perhaps, as much as to a fellow seeker." Exman continued to reveal that "[a] few of us who have lighted a torch from Gerald Heard are to meet in N.Y. regularly—a kind of 'Beloved Community.'"[94] From the early 1940s onward, Exman ventured far and wide in search of his enlarged spirituality. Along

[94] Eugene Exman to Thomas R. Kelly, January 4, 194[1], Box 12, Thomas R. Kelly Papers, Mss. Collection 1135, Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library, Haverford, PA. Exman misdated this letter as 1940. Leigh Schmidt quotes this same excerpt from Exman's letter to Kelly in *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 260. Schmidt develops in rich detail the interconnections among Kelly, Rufus Jones, Gerald Heard, Aldous Huxley, Douglas Steere, and Christopher Isherwood, a group of seekers with whom Exman felt great kinship, and who were instrumental in his own spiritual explorations. See Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 227-268.

with Heard—who published a number of key works with Exman, including *Training for the Life of the Spirit* (1941), *A Preface to Prayer* (1945), and *Prayers and Meditations* (1949)—the novelist Christopher Isherwood, and the writer Aldous Huxley, Exman eagerly explored Vedantism, a form of Hindu meditative practice, and helped establish Trabuco College, a retreat center in Southern California. He discussed the writings of Heard and the ongoing mystical revival at Trabuco with associates and authors, including the novelist Jean Toomer, another mystical seeker and Trabuco acolyte who was struggling in the early 1940s to produce publishable material.[95] In the early 1950s, Exman was still enchanted with the mystical writings of Heard. "Especially noteworthy," Exman wrote in a summary of American religious literature, "are the religious books of Gerald Heard. . . . His genius consists not only in a vast erudition . . . but also in his spiritual synthesis of modern knowledge. He correlates the findings of the scientists, the psychologists, and the mystics."[96] Heard remained the most important mentor in matters of the spirit for the remainder of Exman's life.

Exman's explorations of the mystical and psychological horizons continued throughout the 1940s and 1950s, and his journey reveals a remarkable rootedness in liberal Protestant institutional life while venturing farther afield in his personal spirituality. Soon after his spiritual awakening in the early 1940s, Exman joined the Laymen's Movement, a group of lay Protestant leaders, including John D. Rockefeller and J. C Penney, endeavoring to bring Christian values into the affairs of business and politics.

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[95] The Toomer-Exman exchange can be found in the Jean Toomer Collection, Box 3, Folder 98, the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
[96] Exman, "Reading, Writing, and Religion," 86.

Exman wrote of the group that "our venture, our research, should be directed to a new understanding of God, of our fellows, and of ourselves."[97] He proposed a science-like program of rigorous investigation, for "[e]ach of us has his laboratory of daily living in which he can work . . . with the same skill and persistence as at Oak Ridge."[98] Only through such research into the spirit, proclaimed Exman, would love, ethical concern for others, and Christian civic engagement be possible. "A man's job is to grow a soul," Exman explained, "a continuum of experience that begins here and extends beyond."[99] To further these ends, Exman and other members of the Layman's Movement established the Wainwright House in Rye, New York, in 1951, as a study and retreat center "devoted to a greater understanding of God."[100] Part of Wainwright House's special mission was to serve as a religious retreat center for the United Nations, and as such it advocated a mystical rather than a creedal approach to religious enlightenment. Exman eventually served as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Wainwright House.

In the late 1950s Exman embarked on his most exotic spiritual adventure—participation in a study of the spiritual significance of LSD.[101] Aldous Huxley and others at the time were just beginning their inquiries, and Exman partook in these experiments and reported his findings to an international conference on parapsychology and

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[97] Eugene Exman, "Researchers of the Spirit," in Wallace C. Speers, ed., *Laymen Speaking* (New York: Association Press, 1947), 42.
[98] Exman, "Researchers of the Spirit," 41.
[99] Exman, "Researchers of the Spirit," 41.
[100] "Wainwright House Open," *The New York Times*, May 21, 1951, 29. See also "Suburban Chateau Will Aid Religion," *The New York Times*, June 13, 1951.
[101] On LSD and American spirituality in this period, see Jay Stevens, *After Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987).

pharmacology. The experience induced, Exman wrote, the strong sense that "my personality had to be crucified," a loss of ego he found painful and frightening, yet which led, "at the height of the experience," to the conclusion that "I could not have salvation alone. . . ."[102] Exman concluded, however, that while it did provide "an empirical basis on which to go to people who are skeptical . . . we should not by any means think that this is something we can discuss openly" for "whether you have the mystical experience, noninduced by the drug, or the experience of spiritual reality induced by the drug, you are open to suspicion."[103] Rather than LSD, then, Exman hoped for the transformation of the churches through mystical experience more broadly understood. "We have many orthodox people in theology," he wrote.

> This is my field. I know something about the organized church, and some of my best friends are theologians. I know how awfully hard it is for them to break the shell of orthodoxy. They verbalize, they intellectualize, and this is the spiritual experience, paradoxically, that they are talking about.[104]

Exman did not continue in pursuit of the divine through LSD, as would Aldous Huxley, Huston Smith, Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, and others in the late 1950s and 1960s, but never lost his faith in the centrality of mystical experience to the life of the spirit.[105] In 1960, he penned an essay for Wainwright House, "The Search for Meaning," in which he continued the same focus on depth psychology, mystical ways of knowing and

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[102] Exman, "Individual and Group Experience," 11.
[103] Exman, "Individual and Group Experience," 13, 12.
[104] Exman, "Individual and Group Experience," 11.
[105] See Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954) and Huston Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals* (New York: Tarcher, 2000).

experiencing the divine, and the search for God, beyond any destination, as the very essence of what it means to be human.[106]

Alongside these ever-expanding spiritual explorations, remarkably, Exman carried on his highly successful work in the religion department at Harpers, eventually acquiring an informal status as leading spokesman for the field.[107] He certainly brought a stellar group of writers into the Harper fold. In addition to Fosdick, Fox, Clark, and Heard, theologians H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann were all Exman authors in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, as were Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the French paleontologist, philosopher, and Jesuit priest, whose *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959) Exman edited; D. Elton Trueblood, the Quaker philosopher, author of three mid-1940s bestsellers, *The Predicament of Modern Man* (1944), *Foundations for Reconstruction* (1946), and *Alternative to Futility* (1948); Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day, who published her acclaimed autobiography *The Long Loneliness* (1952) with Exman at Harper; and the African-American mystic Howard Thurman. After the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956, Exman personally traveled to Montgomery to convince Martin Luther King, Jr. to write about the boycott and the civil rights movement, resulting in

[106] Eugene Exman, "Search for Meaning," in Exman, Thomas E. Powers, and Douglas V. Steere, *Search for Meaning* (Rye, NY: Wainwright House, 1961), also published in *Hibbert Journal* 62, no. 239 (July 1962): 275-283.

[107] See, for example, Eugene Exman, "Religious Book Publishing," in Chandler B. Grannis, ed., *What Happens in Book Publishing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957). Exman also served as chairman of the Religious Publishers' Group, a consortium of the major national religious publishers affiliated with the National Association of Book Publishers.

Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story (1958).[108] Exman himself became actively involved in the campaign against nuclear arms and the American war in Vietnam in the late 1950s and 1960s, an example of the frequent connections between mystical spiritual exploration and active social and political engagement. He also wrote the text and captions for an important photo-documentary book on the life and work of Albert Schweitzer, the great German physician, missionary, and mystic, about which he spoke widely, including at the Riverside Church and the Ramakrishna-Vivekanada Center in New York City.[109]

These transformations in Exman's life took two decades to develop, and matured in a culture and a country that was quite different from the world of the Riverside Church and the mainstream of religious publishing in the late 1920 and 1930s, when Exman first began his work at Harpers. The corner of American religious life that Exman inhabited—that of liberal and bookish New York society—was by the late 1950s certainly more open to this kind wide-ranging spirituality than it had been thirty years earlier. Much of this change, in elite New York circles as much as in American middle-class culture, was due to the orientation toward religious reading that emerged during the Second World War. Yet Exman's journey into Vedantism and mystical and psychological and even pharamacological spirituality was a natural, if not an inevitable, outgrowth of the culture of religious reading that he helped build through the religion

[108] Exman, *House of Harper*, 287.
[109] Eugene Exman and Erica Anderson, *The World of Albert Schweitzer: A Book of Photographs* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955); "Religious Services," *The New York Times*, October 9, 1954, 10.

department at Harpers. The ethos of religious openness so ably expressed in Fosdick's *As I See Religion*, in this way, came to fruition in the life of its editor.

CONCLUSION

Under Eugene Exman, the religion department at Harper & Brothers became in the 1930s a leading publisher of religious books in the country. Along with the other general trade presses that aggressively entered the religion field in the late 1920s, Harpers brought the logic of consumerism with full force to the publishing and marketing of religious books. With the structures of middlebrow reading available to guide readers through the open waters of the commercial marketplace, Harpers, Macmillan, and the new religious publishers of the era were able to free themselves from the burden of genteel cultural responsibility. Though the fear of commercializing and thereby cheapening both reading and faith never entirely subsided, the turn toward professionalized and specialized religion departments in the late 1920s nevertheless marked a critical turning point. A central tenet of religious liberalism, after all, had been to redeem the culture through participation in it, and participation in the commercial marketplace emerged as a natural development of this fundamental liberal impulse. The new spirit of religious exploration through consumer-oriented reading and publishing achieved great success at Harpers under Exman, who in his work and in his life embodied this culture as fully as any other twentieth-century American. The manifesto of Exman's religion department was Fosdick's *As I See Religion*, and its bestsellers in the 1930s the positive-thinking guides of Emmet Fox and Glenn Clark, but the ethos of spiritual

openness and eclecticism that Exman brought to Harpers permeated all of religious middlebrow culture.

Religious publishing continued to struggle through the Depression years, though by the late 1930s observers were beginning to note an increase in sales and interest. Observers also noted continuing trends in the content of those books. "The quarrel between faith and science is now, broadly speaking, at an end," declared the writer P. W. Wilson, a bit optimistically, in an important survey of the field in 1938.[110] He also noted the decline of rigid sectarianism, declaring that, in recent years, "the religious bookshelf has suggested that frontiers between churches are breaking down." Yet in addition to these commonplace observations regarding American spirituality, Wilson fretfully perceived something new on the world stage. "The new chasm within civilization," Wilson wrote, "lies between religion and contempt for religion," and here Wilson saw ominous signs. The new "contempt for religion" came not from the crusading and condescending humanism of Mencken and Lippmann and Krutch, with which Fosdick and other liberals had achieved an amiable truce. The dangerous new development in religious life was "not that people go to movies when they ought to be listening to sermons," as he put it, "but an apocalyptic conflict between authorities over the human spirit. . . ." Wilson was speaking, of course, of the rise of fascism in Europe, and especially Nazism in Germany; in the contest between religion and contempt for religion, Wilson proclaimed, "Germany, at the moment, offers the most spectacular battlefield."[111] In

[110] P. W. Wilson, "The Field for Religious Books," *Publishers' Weekly,* February 19, 1938,
[111] Wilson, "The Field for Religious Books," 915.

three short years the United States would engage that battle, with frontlines in American schools, churches, libraries, minds, and souls.

Chapter 4: Religious Reading on a Common Front: The Book Programs of World War II

"Sergeants kneel and pray under fire and testify that 'there are no atheists in foxholes,'" proclaimed Pat Beaird, an executive with the Methodist publishing firm Abingdon-Cokesbury, in March 1943, borrowing Ernie Pyle's famous line. "Shipwrecked sailors and aviators float for weeks without food or water, reading testaments, and later thank God openly and unashamedly for a superior faith which sustained them."[1] These statements, in an essay in *The New York Times Book Review*, repeated the prevailing sentiment of countless other stories in the popular press—the war, for all its tragedies, had been good for religion. While claims such as these certainly represent a kind of religious and patriotic bromide, they also carried a deeper meaning, for the question of the war's effect on religious faith and practice—and faith's utility to the war effort—deeply concerned the nation's religious, military, and political leaders. In this time of great national crisis, the health of Americans' spiritual lives mattered as seldom before.

Beaird's own business, the book business, held a particularly large stake in the matter, as religious reading in the 1940s became a national concern, with implications not just for individuals but, even more, for the war itself, and therefore for national survival. Industry executives, flush with patriotism, sought to enlist books as "weapons in the war of ideas," all the while working, as businessmen, to profit from an evolving and expanding

[1] Pat Beaird, "Religious Books and the War," *The New York Times Book Review*, March 28, 1943, 6.

marketplace. The numbers, in fact, confirm a steady rise from 1939 to 1945 in the sale of religious books as a percentage of all books sales, indicating that such business considerations were indeed well founded.[2] Religious leaders, too, used the opportunity presented by the war to devise new strategies to bring good reading to the public. Beaird, therefore, by invoking Ernie Pyle's "no atheists in foxholes" remark, actually addressed a matter of profound professional and cultural significance. In the midst of the Second World War, religious reading became a matter of national importance. And as a matter of national importance, previously unimagined resources were mobilized to promote the reading of the right kind of religious books.

The religious reading programs of the Second World War built on the work of previous decades, which had successfully drawn national attention to modern religious books and to new spiritual vocabularies in the effort to define a national spiritual center. In particular, the reading programs of the 1940s built on the liberal Protestant search for the universal in religion, captured between the wars most significantly in the embrace of psychology and mysticism, and used this liberal religious outlook as a springboard for more ambitious interfaith endeavors. Now, harnessed to the existential crisis of total war, religious reading assumed unprecedented urgency and influence. This chapter and the following chart how wartime pressures shifted the search for common spiritual ground from the modern, nonsectarian faith championed in the 1920s and 1930s to a faith marked by its commitment to pluralism, democracy, and national unity. The religious

[2] See Eugene Exman, "Reading, Writing, and Religion," *Harper's Magazine* 206, no. 1236 (May 1953): 85. The wartime increase in sales was also discussed at great length in the trade press. See Chapter 5.

middlebrow culture that emerged in the 1940s, therefore, further broadened the notion of spiritual center and played a critical role in promoting the openness to religious "others" that became a hallmark of seeker spirituality by the 1960s.

WARTIME FAITH AND THE MOBILIZATION OF READERS

The relationship of the war to religious faith was a central concern of many Americans at the start of the Second World War. To defeat the fascist foes the nation would have to marshal all of its resources, and many religious leaders believed "these resources would have to be both physical and spiritual."[3] But just what this meant was deeply uncertain, and so a wide-ranging debate ensued among political and religious leaders about the contribution of religious faith to the war effort, and the effect of war on the spirit and psyche of the American people. The place of religious reading in wartime was naturally and inevitably caught up in this larger debate about war and faith.

The voices promoting the war as a boon to faith spoke the loudest. Pat Beaird's championing of wartime faith was, in fact, but one of many proclamations of spiritual heroism in the struggle at hand. Christopher Cross's *Soldiers of God: True Stories of the U.S. Army Chaplains*, for example, which appeared soon after the war's end, told heroic stories of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergymen in the services.[4] Perhaps the most forceful wartime articulation of the war's boost to faith came in the widely read anthology *Faith of*

[3] Gerald L. Sittser, *A Cautious Patriotism: The American Churches and the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 6.
[4] Christopher Cross and Maj. Gen. William R. Arnold, *Soldiers of God: True Stories of the U.S. Army Chaplains* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1945).

Our Fighters (1944), compiled by Ellwood C. Nance, Army chaplain and instructor at the Chaplain School at Harvard.[5] Nance's book contained essays from Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish chaplains; testimonials from servicemen and servicewomen; brief spiritual biographies of Generals Marshall, MacArthur, and Eisenhower; and reprints of letters home from men in combat. It concluded with a brief section, "Faith on the Home Front," highlighted by Vice-President Henry Wallace's entry, "A Peace Worth Fighting For." Every item in the collection remarked on the righteousness of the Allied cause, the power of faith to aid that cause, and, most significantly, the need to overcome frivolous denominational squabbles so that Americans at war might present a united spiritual front.

The linkage between heightened religious fervor and national spiritual unity was drawn not just by the glorifiers of war, but often by those careful observers more finely attuned to the cold reality of combat. Chaplain Richard Chase, decorated for courage under fire in North Africa and Sicily, wrote openly of the spiritual pitfalls of war. He noted instances of petty coarsening, such as those who became profane in speech or drank to excess. More dramatically, he recounted the tale of one formerly humane soldier in Tunisia who now "had no pity, no redeeming quality in his heart. War to him was a sport. Killing men was like shooting ducks."[6] Yet, Chase was quick to observe, while "examples of the grinding effect of war are lamentable," they "are the exception rather than the rule." More commonly, because of the crucible of war, "soldiers become more sober-minded, more awake to the spiritual issues of life, more appreciative of their

[5] Ellwood C. Nance, ed., *Faith of Our Fighters* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1944).
[6] Richard H. Chase, "What War Does to Spiritual Sensibilities," in Nance, ed., *Faith of Our Fighters*, 33.

homeland and its unparalleled advantages."[7] "This," he concluded, in addition to the more mundane fact that his religious services were overflowing with soldiers, "is a convincing answer to those who want to know whether soldiers turn away from or to religion in wartime."[8] Chase ultimately, like all the contributors to *Faith of Our Fighters*, agreed with Beaird that the war was leading to spiritual revitalization, and that this revitalization was breaking down religious boundaries. *Faith of Our Fighters* was the product of a Disciples of Christ publishing house, yet it prominently featured Jewish and Catholic expressions of faith; in this way the anthology's very existence demonstrates that interfaith barriers were, perhaps, falling during the Second World War.

Not all observers were as sanguine as those in *Faith of our Fighters*. The national conversation about faith in wartime, in fact, featured deep divisions and profound concerns in addition to signs of hope. Lloyd C. Douglas, a former Congregational minister and author of the bestselling religious novel *The Robe* (1942), dismissed the "no atheists in foxholes" line by noting rather dryly, "Preachers who quote it are well within their vocational rights. But too much should not be made of it, for there aren't so many atheists anyhow."[9] Douglas concluded that men would leave the service much as they had entered it. The senior chaplain at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station, the largest in the world, agreed, estimating professed atheists among his "raw recruits" to be

[7] Chase, "What War Does to Spiritual Sensibilities," 39.
[8] Chase, "What War Does to Spiritual Sensibilities," 29.
[9] Lloyd C. Douglas, "War and Religion," *Publishers' Weekly,* February 19, 1944, 864.

one in a thousand.[10] Quite often, critics with direct experience of combat remarked on the spiritual degradations of war. Indeed, contrary to the optimism of the Beaird, Nance, Chase, and other opinion makers, accounts from soldiers themselves often spoke of loss rather than gain. "The boys are not going to be angels when they get home. In fact, a good many of them are going the other way," wrote one soldier to the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick in New York. "I just want to make plain that there is actually no great 'turning to God' movement going on."[11]

Fosdick, the nation's highest-profile pacifist, was a natural correspondent for those with similar doubts. Years earlier he had jingoistically championed America's involvement in the First World War, even penning a very successful little book, *The Challenge of the Present Crisis*, to whip up war fervor.[12] But his experiences as a chaplain with the U.S. Army in Europe in 1918 turned him from warmonger into unflinching pacifist. While overseas, Fosdick witnessed for himself the physical brutality of war, but just as powerfully saw how war so often debased psyche and spirit. Now, a quarter century later, Fosdick was a leader of the Churchmen's Campaign for Peace through Mediation, a key pacifist organization, and would not easily accept happy tales from

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[10] John E. Johnson, "The Faith and Practice of the Raw Recruit," in William L. Sperry, ed., *Religion of Soldier and Sailor: One of a Series of Volumes on Religion in the Post-War World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), 45. The estimate was given in the context of other, precise figures for Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish affiliation.

[11] "Dave" to Harry Emerson Fosdick, December 7, 1944. Series 2b, Box 4, Folder 11, Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers, the Burke Library archives at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

[12] Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Challenge of the Present Crisis* (New York: Association Press, 1918). Fosdick later said this was the only book he regretted writing; he tried in vain to withdraw it from circulation.

writers like Beaird of the war's boost to faith. Thoughtful observers like Fosdick understood that the war often ravaged not only the body but also the mind and spirit, through fear, grief, doubt, despair, and the dehumanizing brutality of mass violence. A chaplain serving in this second great war opened his heart to Fosdick, chaplain from the first. "I believe the American press has given a false impression of the upswing of religion among the men in the armed forces," he wrote from aboard the USS General J.H. McRae in early 1945. "Being on a troop transport, I have seen the men 'coming and going.' I can't say that I know one person who has been made 'religious' by the war; but I do know a lot of otherwise 'religious' men who have let down their standards tremendously."[13] Fosdick concurred. "There is a lot of sentimental nonsense talked about the spiritual effects of war," he replied to the chaplain, "but the real effects are exactly as you have stated them. . . . It will not do to fool ourselves by any illusions about the religious consequences of war."[14] In his public pronouncements Fosdick was even more forthcoming, opening his collection of sermons on Christianity in wartime with the blunt declaration: "This certainly is a ghastly time to be alive."[15]

Fosdick and his correspondents in these exchanges expressed a special concern for the moral consequences of the war for individual soldiers, men "who have let down their

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[13] Chaplain Marvin Wilbur to Harry Emerson Fosdick, February 13, 1945. Series 2b, Box 4, Folder 12, Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers, the Burke Library archives at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

[14] Harry Emerson Fosdick to Chaplain Marvin Wilbur, March 2, 1945. Series 2b, Box 4, Folder 12, Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers, the Burke Library archives at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

[15] Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Great Time to Be Alive: Sermons on Christianity in Wartime* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 1.

standards" and therefore "are not going to be angels when they get home." But their concerns indicate more than mere priggishness. Rather, the letters to Fosdick and the accounts in the popular press of heroic wartime religiosity reveal two sides of the vibrant national debate about war and faith. Participants on both sides of the debate understood the war as a testing time for the religious life of the nation, recognizing, on the one hand, the critical role of religious faith in the winning of the war, and, just as critically on the other hand, the vast and unpredictable consequences of mobilization for the nation's religious beliefs and practices. Indeed, Pat Beaird's assertions of heroic faith, the glowing testimonials of the various writers in *Faith of Our Fighters*, and the skepticism of Fosdick and his correspondents all stemmed less from empirical evidence than from a shared set of deep anxieties about the course of the war, about the toll it was exacting, about the spiritual resolve of those in combat, and about the effect of the war on the religious life of the nation. Those, such as Pat Beaird, who worked in religious publishing may have felt these anxieties with particular acuity, for the war challenged the very basis of their enterprise, both as a calling and as a business. In such a fraught religious context, with so much riding on the faith of individual soldiers and civilians, books of religious inspiration in particular became critical tools in the war effort. More than at any time in decades, readers, critics, authors, and publishers all agreed that religious books mattered in the 1940s—and mattered to civilians as well as those in the services. Eventually, religious and publishing leaders would unite to mobilize readers in what was seen as the greatest spiritual struggle of the age.

Pat Beaird and Readers at War

Beaird himself was uniquely qualified to speak to the challenges the war presented to religious publishing, and he used his position to offer unusual insight into the actual reading practices of American men and women on the homefront. His description of the war's impact on the religious reading habits of ordinary Americans provides a critical context for understanding the wartime reading programs. A Methodist from Tyler, Texas, Beaird served in the Navy and Marine Corps in World War I.[16] He fought at Belleau Wood and Soissons, and spent fourteen months hospitalized due to a gassing. Upon recovery he enrolled at Southern Methodist University, and after graduation and a brief stint in newspaper advertising went to Nashville to work for the Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in 1922. Two years later he became head of the book department, a position he held for over three decades. He managed the press through the Depression, the Second World War, and a series of names changes. (The press became Cokesbury in 1925 so as to expand its customer base beyond Methodism, and Abingdon-Cokesbury in 1940 after the merger of the northern and southern branches of the denomination.) In addition to his position with Abingdon-Cokesbury, Beaird chaired for many years the Religious Publishers' Group, a consortium of the major general-interest religious publishers organized under the auspices of the Book Publishers' Bureau (and previously, under the National Association of Book Publishers,

[16] Biographical material on Beaird is scant. See *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, Vol. 50 (New York: James T. White & Co, 1968), 197; and Nolan B. Harmon, ed., *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 241.

the former trade association). He also organized and chaired the Religious Books Committee of the Council on Books in Wartime, and helped coordinate its collaboration with the National Conference of Christians and Jews. These roles positioned him at the center of the publishing industry's response to the spiritual demands of the war.

Beaird, therefore, was especially able to see the greatly expanded role of religious reading to minister across the miles to men and women facing great hardship overseas, and to those left worrying back home. He was a firm believer in the idea of a wartime religious revival, and saw the invigorated interest in religious reading as part of the larger spiritual turn. "This sudden interest in spiritual things," Beaird observed in his extended *The New York Times Book Review* essay, "is not confined to men in active combat." The spiritual turn "extends all the way back through training camps to parents and friends and through them it touches in some manner almost every individual. In most communities churches are filled in spite of gasoline rationing; church budgets are comfortably met" and, of perhaps greatest interest to this bookman, "religious books are being bought and read in astounding numbers."[17] Other observers concurred. Willard Johnson of the National Conference of Christians and Jews discounted the claims of widespread religious revivalism, among either the servicemen or in the civilian population, but agreed with Beaird that "one of the true signs of the return to religion" was the tremendous "increase in the sale of religious books."[18]

[17] Beaird, "Religious Books and the War," 6.
[18] Willard Johnson, "Religious Books in Wartime," *Library Journal* 69 (May 1, 1944): 379.

Beyond noting the sheer increase in sales, Beaird and others remarked even more tellingly on who the new readers of these religious books were, what kinds of books they were reading, and under what circumstances they turned to books for comfort and inspiration. Men and women in the service, of course, accounted for many of the new readers. But, Beaird was quick to note, "The demand for religious books on the home front is more significant perhaps because it receives little publicity, and its proportions are seldom recognized." Many of these homefront readers, Beaird conceded, were traditional churchgoers in traditionally faithful parts of the country, especially small towns in the South and Southwest. Yet, in addition to these relatively stable audiences, Beaird observed new markets developing in response to war mobilization. "Larger cities in crowded war industry areas are having a healthy increased demand for religious books," he noted, "especially the devotional self-help type. . . . [M]uch of it comes from harassed workers, many of whom are separated from family and friends and normal church ties."[19] Farm boys from Oklahoma building airplanes in Los Angeles, a sergeant's wife in Detroit riveting armor plating on tanks, a Polish kid from Scranton unloading steel at the Navy yards in South Philadelphia—these were the new readers Beaird saw for religious books.

Beaird believed that books had a unique role to play in the spiritual lives of these uprooted and anxious Americans. Many Americans, torn away from family and community, harried, tired, and afraid, "are seeking help from the fundamentals of personal religious faith as never before." Gerald Lawson, the librarian of Drew University and an active member of the ALA's Religious Books Round Table, conducted

[19] Beaird, "Religious Books and the War," 6.

an informal study in 1943 that supported these claims. He polled publishers, booksellers, and librarians across the United States, and concluded based on their remarks that "Devotional literature, books which help in the interpretation of life . . . are the chief reading interests of people today."[20] Self-help and devotional books—especially, according to Beaird, books "designed to be read in small doses, usually in quiet moments at home, during the lunch hour, or while commuting"—offered reassurance, intimacy, and day-to-day and moment-to-moment spiritual guidance and companionship. Beaird the patriot and Beaird the businessman found comfort in the expanding role for religious reading. As he commented on the various types of Americans now turning to reading, he solemnly predicted: "They will continue to do so in increasing numbers. Casualty lists will grow. The strain of long hours at high-speed production will affect us more and more. Worry about disrupted business and home life, shortages of necessities and lower living standards will take their toll in civilian morale. This is why religious books are becoming recognized as important to a sustained total war effort."[21] Beaird's unique vantage point allows us to see behind sales figures to get a glimpse of the men and women turning to books in response to "a sustained total war effort." But in order to fully understand the place of inspirational reading in the fight against fascism, we must turn to the major national reading programs of wartime America: the various endeavors of the Council on Books in Wartime, and the Religious Book Week campaign of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

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[20] O. Gerald Lawson, "Religious Books in the Life of Today," *Library Journal* 68 (June 1, 1943): 453.
[21] Beaird, "Religious Books and the War," 6.

THE SPIRITUAL CRUSADE OF THE COUNCIL ON BOOKS IN WARTIME

The war set Americans reading. The pronounced upsurge in religious reading in particular, analyzed so cogently and authoritatively by Pat Beaird, was but part of a much larger effort by many Americans to improve their reading practices during the war. Americans in the 1940s already had a long history of using reading as a means of self-improvement, and since at least the 1920s, with the introduction of the Book-of-the-Month and other book clubs, the book industry had aggressively marketed reading and book buying to the middle class as a means of social ascent. Now, in the midst of the war, the cultural pressures to read books gained a new and larger significance. Reading the right books became part of the war effort. Indeed, as part of the war effort—particularly this war effort against idolatrous and barbarous fascism—reading assumed a spiritual dimension alongside the patriotic one, for the war itself was infused with spiritual meaning. The narrower campaign for strictly religious reading, of which Beaird was a key leader, was a small but significant part of this larger holy war for books.

As the religious book business struggled to adapt to the vast cultural shifts brought about by mobilization for total war, publishing and religious leaders drew on the lessons learned in the previous two decades of religious book marketing, and now drafted the mechanisms of religious middlebrow culture for service in the wartime crusade. The search for a spiritual center, which had been a matter of business and religious concern in the 1920s and 1930s, became a matter of national concern in the 1940s. The war, agreed political, religious, and publishing leaders, demanded a united spiritual front, and so, alongside the spiritual eclecticism of the 1920s and 1930s, interfaith or "goodwill" efforts,

joining Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities and traditions, assumed unprecedented cultural legitimacy and urgency. Wartime reading programs played a critical role in these cultural and spiritual transformations.

The most important enterprise in this wide-ranging book promotion project was the Council on Books in Wartime, a philanthropic organization founded by New York publishing leaders.[22] The Council engaged in numerous activities to promote reading, including the production of radio and film programming and the distribution of recommended reading lists to booksellers and libraries across the country. Most impressively, through its subsidiary organization, Editions for the Armed Services, Inc., the Council coordinated the production and distribution of over 123 million copies of 1,180 titles in special Armed Services Editions (ASE), sent to American men and women in active service, in military hospitals, and held as prisoners-of-war.[23] The motivations and tactics of the Council in promoting reading during the war illuminate the increasingly influential ideology of mass reading by the 1940s, especially the middlebrow emphasis on reading as a means of cultural betterment and self-improvement. The Council brought this same middlebrow orientation to its promotion of religious books,

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[22] The best account of the Council is Trysh Travis, "Books as Weapons and 'The Smart Man's Peace': The Work of the Council on Books in Wartime," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 60, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 353-399. For other histories of the Council and its work, see Robert O. Ballou, *A History of the Council on Books in Wartime* (New York: Country Life Press, 1946); John Alden Jamieson, *Editions for the Armed Services, Inc: A History* (New York: Editions for the Armed Services, Inc., 1948); and John Y. Cole, ed., *Books in Action: The Armed Services Editions* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1984).

[23] Ballou, *A History of the Council on Books in Wartime*, 3. The Council also formed Overseas Editions, Inc., which produced a much smaller number of books and titles in Overseas Editions.

which it pursued through its own Religious Books Committee and its cooperation with the religious reading initiative of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

The Council Finds Its Calling

The Council on Books in Wartime grew out of conversations among publishing executives in the months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Originally conceived at a February 1942 lunch meeting of Clarence B. "Clip" Boutell of G. P. Putnam's Sons and George Oakes of *The New York Times*, the Council took shape quickly; by March its bureaucratic structure was already sketched out. W. W. Norton and Frederic G. Melcher of *Publishers' Weekly* assumed leading roles, along with representatives from the American Booksellers Association and the Book Publishers Bureau; Dr. Henry Seidel Canby, editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature* and consultant to the Book Division of the Office of Facts and Figures (later the Office of War Information) was brought on as an advisor. Through Canby the Council also forged ties with Chester Kerr, Chief of the Book Division of the Office of Facts and Figures. With this group of leaders in place, the Council was able from its inception to work at the highest levels to coordinate the military and federal government with private industry. It conducted all that it did in consultation with cultural arbiters such as Dr. Canby.

The publishers who ran the Council, and even more, the critics such as Canby brought in to advise it, saw themselves as cultural "experts," those with special knowledge and, therefore, unique responsibilities to use that knowledge for public good. As experts, they faced the same tensions that marked all facets of the professionalization of American

life since the end of the nineteenth century, tensions felt with particular acuity in middlebrow literary culture. These men sought leadership of a public cultural endeavor in a society deeply committed to democratic values. How, then, to impart high standards to a reading public while respecting the autonomy of readers? This was the central tension in all undertakings in the public promotion of reading, faced by organizers of the Religious Book Week of the 1920s and by the editorial committee of the Religious Book Club, and now faced again by the Council on Books in Wartime. Not coincidently, then, given these challenges, the Council drew heavily on those men and women with experience navigating these tensions. Canby, a former English professor with a PhD from Yale, was the chairman of the selection committee of the Book-of-the-Month Club in addition to serving as editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Also brought in to advise the Council at various points were the anthologist Louis Untermeyer and the critic and Book-of-the-Month Club committee member Dorothy Canfield Fisher. These critics, with their experience as mediators between the worlds of high learning and mass culture, proved invaluable as the publishers on the Council struggled to define their roles as cultural authorities.

Members of the Council eventually came to realize that their contribution to the war effort must not simply be one of cultural enlightenment, as valuable as that might be. Rather, they came to see that books might play a larger role, one of spiritual sustenance, making the matter of expert guidance in reading all the more critical to the national cause. One of the most explicit articulations of the Council's spiritual role came not from a publisher or a critic, however, but from a statesman, Assistant Secretary of State Adolf

Berle, who in May 1942 delivered one of the opening-night speeches during the Council's inaugural meetings, held in Times Hall. In his speech, "The Literature of Power," Berle boldly proclaimed the Council's spiritual mission. He agreed with the widely held notion that a central problem of the modern age was simply sorting through the flood of books and new knowledge. To combat the emptiness of such knowledge for knowledge's sake, though, Berle implored the leaders of the Council to promote books that "move the spirit of men" and speak to "the deepest and most fundamental . . . riddles of human life." The American people, he told his audience, would surely face great hardships, both public and private, in the days and years ahead, and the leaders of the book business must be prepared to meet their needs. "Out of books which we are given there will largely be constructed those buildings in which all of us must dwell," he declared to his audience of book moguls. "In the greatest of our individual crises—the crisis of long parting, the crisis of bereavement, the crisis of fear, the crisis of death—in these we must live[,] in these mind-dwellings alone."[24] Berle here captured his audience's own sense of purpose perfectly. The spiritual undertone of the Council's mission, and the religious significance of Council members' callings, pervaded the full range of the Council's undertakings throughout the war.

In March of 1942 the Council adopted, on the suggestion of Norton, its famous slogan, "Books as Weapons in the War of Ideas." President Roosevelt himself soon became an enthusiastic supporter and explicitly endorsed the "books as weapons" theme. In a letter delivered to the annual banquet of the American Booksellers Association,

[24] Quoted in Travis, "Books as Weapons and 'The Smart Man's Peace'," 371-372.

meeting May 6, 1942[25] in the Astor Hotel in New York, Roosevelt emphasized the contribution of books to the Allied cause. "We all know that books burn," he remarked, drawing an often-repeated contrast with the notorious Nazi book burning of May 10, 1933, when the works of Jews, Marxists, and other "unGerman" authors were destroyed in a coordinated campaign across the country.

> [Y]et we have the greater knowledge that books cannot be killed by fire. People die, but books never die. No man and no force can abolish memory. No man and no force can put thought in a concentration camp forever. No man and no force can take from the world the books that embody man's eternal fight against tyranny of every kind. In this war, we know, books are weapons. And it is a part of your dedication always to make them weapons for man's freedom.[26]

FDR, in this vision of the power of books, echoed ancient religious distinctions between the body and the soul, describing books at once as material objects that burn, yet also that embody greater, living spiritual forces that "cannot be killed" and "never die." More particularly, Roosevelt's language invokes the story from the Hebrew scriptures of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who were cast into a furnace for refusing to obey Nebuchadnezzar, and yet, protected by an angel, emerged unscathed.[27] The spiritualization of reading, already endorsed by the Assistant Secretary of State, now received the full support of the Commander-in-Chief as critical to the war effort.

In a letter the following December to Norton, Chairman of the Council, Roosevelt repeated many of these themes, especially the central contention that books as

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[25] May 6—perhaps coincidental to this meeting, perhaps not—was the feast day of St. John the Evangelist, who was the patron saint of the book trades in England in the medieval and early modern periods.

[26] Franklin D. Roosevelt, "A Message to the Booksellers of America," May 6, 1942. Published in *Publishers' Weekly*, May 9, 1942, 1740.

[27] See Daniel 3:19-30.

spiritual entities constituted a kind of weapon. "In our country's first year of war," he wrote, "we have seen the growing power of books as weapons." A "war of ideas can no more be won without books," he continued, "than a naval war can be won without ships. . . . I hope that all who write and publish and sell and administer books will . . . rededicate themselves to the single task of arming the mind and spirit of the American people with the strongest and most enduring weapons."[28] American evangelists of religious reading had since the early nineteenth century championed the spiritual power of mass reading, an effort that gained renewed vitality in the 1920s. President Roosevelt, in advocating general reading with such spiritually charged language, drew on this deep cultural reservoir, and anticipated the more explicit religious reading efforts to come.

The Council on Books in Wartime—the organization responsible for carrying out FDR's grand vision—was remarkably small, staffed mostly with volunteer labor and operating on a total, four-year budget, from February 1942 to February 1946, of only $98,000, $77,000 of that contributions from publishers.[29] An editorial advisory committee, comprised of publishers, booksellers, librarians, and a representative of the Book-of-the-Month Club, chose the titles for the Council to publish in special Armed Services Editions (ASE), and from these lists the Army and Navy selected titles to purchase. Philip Van Doren Stern, a former editor with Pocket Books, oversaw the entire

[28] Franklin D. Roosevelt to W. W. Norton, December 1, 1942. Reprinted as an epigraph in Ballou, *A History of the Council on Books in Wartime.*
[29] Ballou, *A History of the Council on Books in Wartime*, "Appendix A: Financial Summary," 95.

operation.[30] Yet with the explicit endorsement of the President, careful coordination with military and government leaders, and generous support from publishers, this modest enterprise exerted a far-reaching influence on American reading during the war.

The Armed Services Editions proved the most lasting contribution of the Council. From the outset, W. W. Norton and others were aware of the profound cultural consequences of giving a vast array of reading material to millions of American fighting men and women. Critical to this contribution were the physical characteristics of the books themselves. Every effort was made to keep them small and cheap. The books measured only 5½" by 3⅞", half the size of a copy of *Reader's Digest* cut horizontally. Each page contained two columns of text. Such an arrangement allowed unabridged editions, printed on presses and paper normally used for magazines or telephone directories, to be produced for only six cents, and to fit in the pocket of a standard-issue uniform. At such a low price, the Army and Navy simply gave the books to soldiers and sailors—they did not have to be returned with other equipment upon discharge. This facilitated extensive, informal trading, and the practice of leaving copies and taking others when passing through bases or other military facilities. Many in the industry were concerned that the production of vast numbers of cheap books would undercut domestic sales, and so precautions were taken to keep copies out of civilian hands. But Norton did not share these fears. Since soldiers and sailors were free to keep their books, Norton knew the Armed Services Editions could mold an entire generation of readers. "The very fact that millions of men will have an opportunity to learn what a book is and what it can

[30] Jamieson, *Editions for the Armed Services, Inc.*, 15.

mean," he wrote in a memorandum to the Council's Executive Committee in March 1943, "is likely now and in the postwar years to exert a tremendous influence on the postwar course of the industry."[31] According to historians of the publishing industry, Norton was right; the success of the Armed Services Editions stimulated the tremendous postwar growth of the then-fledgling paperback business.[32]

Remarkably for an organization promoting books as weapons, the Armed Services Editions themselves remained relatively free of nationalistic propaganda. This may be due, to a certain extent, to the ever-present desire to distinguish American practices from Nazi. Certainly, the list of Armed Services Editions contained books describing the enemy, such as John F. Embree's *The Japanese Nation*, and a few titles about military life, such as Capt. Harry C. Butcher's *My Three Years with Eisenhower*, that one might consider propagandistic. But the vast majority of titles were chosen simply on their literary merits. Trysh Travis notes the considerable anxiety Council members felt that their efforts would appear either self-promoting—using the war to make a buck—or beholden to the federal government in a way that would undermine their credibility. "The most persistent manifestations of the debate over how to promote their work without seeming self-promoting arose in discussions over how to publicize books directly related to the war effort," she writes, and so, when actually faced with the task of

[31] Reprinted in Ballou, *A History of the Council on Books in Wartime*, 66.
[32] In this regard, see Kenneth Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1984).

producing books in Armed Services Editions, they skirted the issue by largely steering clear of such works.[33]

Rather than nationalistic propaganda, the Council engaged in literary propaganda. The Council used books as weapons with the remarkable notion that good books, in and of themselves, might make for better men and women, who would, in turn, become better soldiers and more dutiful civilians. In this they adhered to the time-honored notion, rooted in the genteel tradition, that a healthy democracy demanded a literate public, a notion central to their self-understanding as public-minded experts. More typical than books about the Japanese or Eisenhower, therefore, were novels, biographies, and plays. Popular fiction dominated the list of Armed Services Editions, including thirty-three "Adventure" titles such as *Call of the Wild* and *Tarzan of the Apes;* one hundred sixty "Westerns," by Zane Grey, Ernest Haycox, and others; one hundred twenty-two "Mysteries"; one hundred thirteen "Historical Novels"; twenty-three "Classics," ranging from *The Iliad* to the works of Mark Twain; and most of all, two hundred and forty-six titles of "Contemporary Fiction." That Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* and John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* might be considered "weapons in the war of ideas" testifies to the broad-minded and highly literary approach the Council took to its work.[34]

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[33] Travis, "Books as Weapons and 'The Smart Man's Peace'," 363.

[34] These classifications come from the Council's own classification scheme, reproduced in Jamieson, *Editions for the Armed Services, Inc.*, 17. In contrast, Eric Johnson, the wartime head of the Motion Picture Producers' Association, told members of the Screen Writers Guild that when it came to making movies during the war, "We'll have no more *Grapes of Wrath*. . . ." Quoted in Lary May, "Making the American Consensus: The Narrative of Conversion and Subversion in World War II Films," in Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E.

The Council's willingness to produce books of mass appeal, such as Westerns and mysteries, indicates its belief in the value, as Travis notes, of "reading *qua* reading."[35] Books classified as "Current Affairs and the War," by contrast, numbered only twenty. The Council, in fact, lobbied successfully for the overturning of harsh censorship regulations in the Army and Navy, with the belief that open access to reading—no matter the specific literary merits—befitted the fighting forces of a free people.[36]

Accounts from men in the service testify to the success of the Council's literary propaganda. Though anecdotal and not necessarily representative, letters from soldier-readers to the Council do reveal some of the ways these texts were received and used. An Army truck driver writing from New Guinea, for example, praised the Council for the ASE's physical design, noting its many practical benefits. "Our modern 'bloomer-pocket' uniform makes it possible for us to conceal one of them perfectly from the watchful eye of a superior officer," he wrote. "[T]hey are easy to hide when you should be doing something else." In this regard, the driver told the Council of a discovery he made when unloading a small landing boat. He found, he confided, "a small box with three or four [ASE books] in it fastened to the wall of [the] engine compartment. . . ." But more

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Hirsch, eds., *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness during World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 71.

[35] Travis, "Books as Weapons and 'The Smart Man's Peace'," 388.

[36] See, in this regard, Ballou, *A History of the Council on Books in Wartime*, 20-26.

significantly, he concluded, "reading takes the mind away from the experiences we have that are so difficult. . . ." [37]

The reception and use of reading by fighting men ranged from simple diversion to profound personal transformation. A *Saturday Evening Post* article from June 1945 about the Armed Services Editions, for example, told of men in combat, under constant shelling, laughing at passages from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and, more commonly, of soldiers finding escape from boredom in an adventure story.[38] Indeed, many of the soldiers who wrote directly to the Council mentioned this same sort of emotional uplift—reading as pleasure amid the misery of war. Yet a fuller accounting of the impact of these books must include uplift in a second sense, in the spiritual and intellectual sense closer to the heart of Adolf Berle and the men and women who ran the Council. Ellwood Nance, the Army chaplain who edited the *Faith of Our Fighters* anthology, also conducted an extensive survey of soldiers' reading habits, which he described in *Publishers' Weekly*. "Soldiers are seriously interested in religion," he reported, "but in their religious reading they prefer a book that is written in non-technical language and that reaches its goal in less than 150 pages." But even if they stayed away from books written for the specialist, Ellwood noted, "[m]any of them are seeking information as well as comfort in their religious reading."[39] Frequently, letter writers confirmed Ellwood's findings of these two

[37] Elmer Pease to The Council on Books in Wartime, July 6, 1944. Council on Books in Wartime Collection, Box 32, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University. Used by permission of the Princeton University Library.
[38] David G. Wittels, "What the G.I. Reads," *Saturday Evening Post*, June 23, 1945, 11.
[39] Ellwood C. Nance, "Ours is a Reading Army," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 17, 1945, 841.

related benefits of readily available reading material—books boosted morale and, at the same time, improved the spiritual wellbeing and intellectual sophistication of common fighting men.

Historians of reading often point to the perceived tension between reading for pleasure, which was throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century coded as passive and feminine, and reading for intellectual development, which was seen as active and masculine. The experiences of readers of Armed Services Editions indicate a tremendous fluidity in these categories, a fluidity linked, perhaps, to the cultural turmoil brought about by the war. The double uplift of reading—both emotional and intellectual, both spiritual and cultural—crossed gender lines, coloring the reading experiences of men and women, in uniform and on the homefront. In the 1920s publishing and religious leaders regularly remarked on the masculine vigor and practicality of modern religious reading as part of their promotional campaigns aimed at disaffected young men. Soldiers in the Second World War now freely crossed these perceived barriers, and embraced reading for all its joys, diversions, and uplifting and ennobling potential.

Again, the soldiers themselves tell their tale best. "Reading material is more than scarce and more often than not your books are all that is available," wrote one soldier to Archibald Ogden, the Council's executive director. "Since these books are often the sole means of escape for G.I.'s [sic], you are instilling in them, whether you are aware of it or

not, a taste for good reading that will surely persist come victory."[40] Another writer, a commanding officer, shared the same observation. "It has been noticed that many men are acquiring the habit of reading for amusement and instruction who had previously viewed the printed word as a nuisance," he reported in stiff military prose. "It is believed that Editions for the Armed Services, Inc. has rendered a lasting service to both men and country, for this habit will endure."[41] John Cuddeback, a sailor writing from Guam, summarized clearly and personally the uplifting contribution of ASE books. "With six long tiresome days a-sea to look forward to and with only a small ship's crew library, we were far from happy," he recounted of his transit from Pearl Harbor across the Pacific. "But then the library produced a box of your books. We grabbed them," he continued, invoking a perfect image of innocent, bodily pleasure, "like children with a box of chocolates." Cuddeback reported finding a Quonset hut in Guam stocked with a complete collection of ASE titles, set aside for men in transit, since regular Navy libraries would not lend books to men who could ship out at any minute. "So you can see your books have done several amazing things from the experience of one person. They have made a lot of sailors happy and intertained [sic] during the many days of travel asea," he remarked, highlighting the diversionary benefits of reading. Yet, according to Cuddeback, the books did more than distract; they ennobled. He noted, rather vividly,

[40] Joe to Archibald G. Ogden, December 12, 1944. Council on Books in Wartime Collection, Box 31, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University. Used by permission of the Princeton University Library.

[41] Lt. J. S. Arwine to The Council on Books in Wartime, December 1, 1944. Council on Books in Wartime Collection, Box 31, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University. Used by permission of the Princeton University Library.

that because of ASE reading, "more fellows have gotten a real interest in books, who otherwise would not have gotten beyond the Superman stage." No longer children with a box of chocolates or a comic, through books they had become men. "I don't know who or what people I can thank for bring [sic] these books to us, but we all thank them."[42] In his homespun way—not even knowing whom to thank—this sailor compellingly described the uplift provided by wartime reading.

The Council and Reading on the Homefront

In addition to the production of Armed Services Editions, the Council on Books in Wartime endeavored through a variety of channels to promote reading on the homefront. It produced and distributed recommended reading lists to booksellers and libraries, most of which focused on books providing information about Allied and enemy nations and other current affairs pertaining to the war. The Council also quickly seized on the popular media, including radio and film, to advertise its efforts and, more generally, promote reading and book buying. The Council's first radio project, suggested by Chester Kerr of the Office of War Information, was a reading of Stephen Vincent Benét's poem "They Burned the Books" on NBC in May 1942 (joining FDR in drawing attention to the Nazi book burning of May 1933). The success of this endeavor spurred the formation of a radio committee and the hiring of a radio director, Nan Taylor of WLB in Minneapolis. During the summer and fall of 1942, the Council arranged for authors to

[42] John M. Cuddeback to The Council on Books in Wartime, n.d. Council on Books in Wartime Collection, Box 31, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University. Used by permission of the Princeton University Library.

appear on popular women's radio shows and other news and chat programs. The Council soon moved to produce its own programming and eventually organized three recurring broadcasts, all interview shows: "Books Are Bullets," hosted by Bennet Cerf of Random House, which ran on WQXR from October 1942 through December 1945 and included conversations with Louis Adamic, Pearl Buck, Norman Cousins, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Margaret Mead, and Mark Van Doren, among many others; "Fighting Words," which appeared on WMCA; and most importantly, "Words at War," which in the late spring of 1943 gained a coveted network spot, 8:30 P.M. Thursdays, on NBC. Along the way, "Words at War" interviewed Ellwood Nance regarding *Faith of Our Fighters*, and other social critics as diverse as Walter Lippmann, Ernie Pyle, and Frederic Hayek.[43] In its radio programming the Council focused more on current affairs than fiction, yet, as with its Armed Services Editions and reading lists, it showed considerable editorial independence. Though hailed by *Variety* and *The New York Times* for its coverage of delicate issues such as racism and poverty, "Words at War" finally ran into trouble in the summer of 1945 after discussing a book advocating full employment, a notion associated with socialism. NBC, under pressure from business groups, began to add a disclaimer to the broadcast, and the Council decided to end the show rather than broadcast under such circumstances.

The Council's brief foray into film grew out of the same desire to mingle educational current affairs programming with uplift. A committee of representatives from

[43] For a list of all radio interviews, see "Appendix B: Radio Programs," in Ballou, *A History of the Council on Books in Wartime*, 96-100.

various publishers, the American Booksellers Association, and Warner Brothers secured an agreement with Newsreel Distributors, Inc., and Film Distributors, Inc., for the production and screening of a number of shorts based on interviews with authors. Due to film shortages, only six were produced. In each, newsreel footage from the war ran as the author and interviewer chatted about the book in question. These films were shown in theaters across the country, and focused exclusively on books with direct relevance to the war, such as Eve Curie's *Journey Among Warriors* and John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano*.

A more successful visual medium than film for spreading the Council's message was the poster. Used widely in a variety of advertising and publication-relations capacities since the nineteenth century, posters gained particular prominence as recruiting and propaganda tools during the First World War. C. B. Falls's and Adolph Treidler's masterful Religious Book Week posters in the 1920s represented but two of the many antecedents of the Council's specifically book-themed posters. During the Second World War, the Office of War Information and a variety of private entities built on these earlier efforts, using the graphic arts for their own literary propaganda. The Victory Book Campaign—a joint effort of the American Library Association, the Red Cross, and the USO—for example, produced a series of posters to encourage Americans to donate books to men and women in the armed services (Figure 4.1). The most simple of these posters—the two-color image of an eagle carrying a bundle of books—was often reproduced in magazine and newspaper advertising, while the other, more graphically sophisticated images were designed for greatest impact in full-sized public display. C. B. Falls, creator of the bust of Lincoln poster from the 1920s Religious Book Week as well as

the hugely successful "Books Wanted" poster from World War I, returned to this familiar theme with the "We Want Books" poster (and a nearly identical poster reading "Leave Books Here"). A third, even more evocative design with the caption, "Give More Books—Give Good Books," featured a hand holding a book, open to a page depicting a soldier against a flag background. Each poster emphasized, as did the very name of the Victory Book Campaign itself, the contribution of book reading to the ultimate triumph of the Allied cause. The Victory Book Campaign, aided by such visually gripping posters, proved quite successful in securing donated books, but unfortunately many of the books were bulky hardcovers that were difficult to ship, and many others were of poor quality, limiting the number of soldiers who actually benefited from the campaign. But regardless of the success or failure of the campaign's stated goals, these posters nevertheless presented to the American public the notion of reading, and reading "good books," as critical to victory.[44]

The Council on Books in Wartime, in conjunction with the Office of War Information, produced its own posters for libraries, bookstores, and other public venues to support its much more productive undertakings. Almost all highlighted the contrast between American liberties and the Nazi book burning of May 1933, including one that depicted a book burning in the upper left of the poster and the Statute of Liberty, clutching a book in her left arm, in the lower right. Most famous and powerful of the Council's posters was a 1942 design, again featuring a Nazi book burning (Figure 4.2).

[44] Patti Clayton Becker, *Books and Libraries During World War II: Weapons in the War of Ideas* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 127-148.

Set against an ominous, glowing red sky, a giant book, seemingly made of stone, defies the diminutive book burners as it towers unscathed above their ghoulish, shadowy forms. Across the cover of this giant book runs an excerpt (slightly altered) from FDR's May 1942 letter to the booksellers of America, beginning with the line, "Books cannot be killed by fire." The Council's tag line, "Books Are Weapons in the War of Ideas," frames the bottom of the image in equally bold red. When viewed with FDR's highly spiritual language splashed in giant letters across the book, the scene becomes less a book burning than a burning at the stake, an unholy Inquisition in which a resolute martyr stands proudly, even as his body is tormented. The Council itself strove to make these religious meanings clear to the public, sending notices to three hundred and fifty clergymen nationwide in May 1943, asking them to mention the tenth anniversary of the Nazi book burning in their weekly sermons.[45]

A final image from American wartime propaganda reveals most dramatically the deep spiritual meaning of books as weapons, and the implicit but profound link between intellectual and religious freedom, both of which were understood to be a stake in the war against fascism. The Council, as noted, chose to focus its 1942 poster on the distinction between Nazi book burning and FDR's vision of the eternal value of books, leaving the religious implications as subtext. The Office of War Information produced, the following year, by contrast, a poster that left no room for subtlety (Figure 4.3). Produced in the same, stark black and red as the Council's poster, the OWI image depicted a Nazi arm, replete with Swastika, thrusting a large dagger down through the center of a Bible.

[45] Travis, "Books as Weapons and 'The Smart Man's Peace'," 376.

Beneath, the caption simply read, "This Is The Enemy." (This was just one of many posters bearing this slogan.) Here, most clearly, American spiritual, literary, and nationalistic propaganda efforts merged, as Nazi book burning morphed into a stabbing, a bloody and personal attempt to kill the book whose spirit cannot die. An attack on reading was an attack on faith itself, the OWI was saying, with the Good Book a central symbol of all that Americans were fighting to preserve.

The Council and Religious Reading

Not surprisingly, in such a climate, as reading assumed both patriotic and spiritual dimensions, the Council on Books in Wartime soon began to employ its extensive promotional apparatus for the advocacy of explicitly religious books. To many observers, the effort came none too soon. John E. Johnson, the senior chaplain of the Great Lakes Naval Station near Chicago, expressed a profound concern for the lack of high quality religious reading, and therefore religious literacy, among the fresh recruits in the naval induction center where he served. In a commentary on "The Faith and Practice of the Raw Recruit," Johnson noted that most new inductees read only joke books and cartoon books, with few dabbling in more edifying works. The result, he concluded, was that the typical new sailor "brings with him very little knowledge of the Bible and of religious literature, even though he may have attended Sunday School a good part of his life. . . . Words of the Christian Faith—sacrament, communion, grace, prayer, baptism, creed, commandments—convey very little meaning to the average raw recruit. . . ." As if pleading for the very effort the Council was poised to begin, Johnson remarked, "We take

definite steps to prevent them from becoming intellectual morons. What steps are taken to prevent them from becoming moral and spiritual morons?" [46]

To such concerns the Council responded. In September 1942, W. W. Norton asked Pat Beaird, of Abingdon-Cokesbury and the Religious Publishers Group, for a meeting to discuss avenues for cooperation between religious publishers and the Council. The meeting, which took place October 6 over lunch at the Harvard Club in New York, proved immensely fruitful, and Beaird noted that the representatives of the religious book publishers were "thoroughly in accord with the purposes of the Council" and eager to support its work. In sentiments he would repeat the following spring in *The New York Times*, Beaird affirmed the essence of the Council's mission—to use books as weapons—and noted the special role that religious books were playing in that cause. "Religious books are making a very definite contribution to the war effort," he assured the Council, "in building and sustaining morale, in preparing for the peace to come, and the social problems to follow."[47] The Council's use of books as weapons, and the culturally widespread recognition of the spiritual dimension of the war, led to an easy and natural alliance between religious publishers and the Council.

With such an understanding of the scope and promise of their coordination, the meeting between Norton and the religious publishers produced two concrete proposals: the formation of a Religious Books Committee of the Council on Books in Wartime,

[46] Johnson, "The Faith and Practice of the Raw Recruit," 47-48, 66.
[47] Pat Beaird to Board of Directors, Council on Books in Wartime, October 15, 1942. Council on Books in Wartime Collection, Box 18, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University. Used by permission of the Princeton University Library.

"consisting of publishers representing the Catholic, Jewish and Protestant faiths," of which Beaird was named chair; and the recommendation that this committee work with the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ), assisting this prominent interfaith organization with its nation-wide Religious Book Week, already planned for March 1943.[48] The Religious Books Committee oversaw the publication in Armed Services Editions of a small number of explicitly religious texts, including Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows* and *The Book Nobody Knows*, but the most significant work the Council performed in religious reading was its cooperation with the NCCJ. The idea of cooperation between the Council on Books in Wartime and the National Conference of Christians and Jews had first been proposed, a few weeks earlier, by Ellen O'Gorman Duffy, Associate Director of the NCCJ and head of its Religious Book Week campaign, in conversations with Clip Boutell of Putnam. Boutell excitedly forwarded the idea to W. W. Norton, announcing that "the promotion of this religious book week [is] directly in line with the aims of the Council. . . ."[49] Norton, in turn, recommended the idea to Beaird, and now the full weight of the Council and the Religious Publishers Group was behind the NCCJ book-week proposal.

The major religious book initiatives of the Council—its own Religious Books Committee, and its support of the National Conference of Christians and Jews—soon

[48] Pat Beaird to Board of Directors, Council on Books in Wartime, October 15, 1942. Council on Books in Wartime Collection, Box 18, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University. Used by permission of the Princeton University Library.
[49] C. B. Boutell to W. W. Norton, October 2, 1942. Council on Books in Wartime Collection, Box 18, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University. Used by permission of the Princeton University Library.

developed into the most influential endeavor to promote religious books during the war. Significantly, each was established explicitly and self-consciously as an interfaith endeavor. As recently as 1931, the U.S. Supreme Court had still self-assuredly declared the United States to be a "Christian nation," and, from a purely statistical and demographic (if not constitutional) point of view, they were right.[50] Within this "Christian nation," Roman Catholics and Jews still were often viewed with suspicion by the politically and socially dominant Protestant majority. However, the demands of the war cut deeply into these longstanding prejudices and assumptions, greatly energizing the interfaith efforts begun in the 1920s. So powerful were the forces calling for a united spiritual front in the war with fascism that the National Conference of Christians and Jews, a marginal group (albeit with an influential membership) in the 1920s, was able by the early 1940s to assume a central position as the primary public arbiter of proper religious reading for the American people during the war and immediate postwar years. Old tensions did not disappear, especially between Protestants and Catholics, and, within Protestantism, between liberals and conservatives. But with the backing of the Religious Publishers Group and the Council on Books in Wartime, this "goodwill" organization became the loudest advocate for religious reading in 1940s America. The reading agenda of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, then, came to stand alongside the Religious Book Club and the Religious Book Week of the 1920s as the major religious

[50] Martin Marty, *Modern American Religion, Volume 3: Under God, Indivisible, 1941-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 54.

reading initiatives of the first half of the twentieth century, and to exert an equally powerful influence on the course of popular religious thought and practice.

BOOKS FOR A DEMOCRACY AT WAR: THE RELIGIOUS READING CAMPAIGN OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

The National Conference of Christians and Jews was in many ways a natural partner for the Council on Books in Wartime. Each was a product of the Northeast establishment and its notion of *noblesse oblige*. Each consisted of men with Ivy League pedigrees and a broad-minded sense of obligation to use their power and influence on behalf of the national good, which generally meant working to shape the culture in their liberal, tolerant image. Each was headquartered in New York City, and therefore the men active in the highest echelons of the two organizations undoubtedly dined together at the same clubs and restaurants, attended the same churches and synagogues, lived in the same neighborhoods, read the same books and magazines, and, as a result, shared the same social concerns and vision for the country. The affinities between these two enterprises were so close that in subsequent years Henry Seidel Canby, Frederic G. Melcher, Chester Kerr, and many other leaders of the Council would also serve in leadership roles with the National Conference's Religious Book Week.

The National Conference of Christians and Jews was founded in 1927 after nearly a decade of tentative outreach efforts between Christians and Jews.[51] The heightened xenophobia in the late 1910s and 1920s, characterized most notoriously by the Red

[51] The standard history of the National Conference of Christians and Jews is James E. Pitt, *Adventures in Brotherhood* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1955).

Scare, the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, and the passage of the National Origins Act in 1924, spurred many of these early interfaith gestures. However, many Protestant denominations themselves, while initiating unprecedented dialogue with Jewish groups, often clumsily contributed to the climate of suspicion. While not acting from the same violently racist and nativist impulses that inspired the Klan, many in the mainline churches likewise feared the specter of unassimilated masses, and established soon after World War I entities designed to help "Americanize" immigrants. Often, quite naturally, these Protestant groups associated Americanization rather explicitly with proselytization, and embarked on efforts to convert immigrants, mostly Jewish and Catholic, to their version of Protestantism. The aptly titled Department of Christian Americanization of the Protestant Episcopal Church, for example, announced in 1919 a drive to evangelize Jews in America.[52] Jewish groups protested, and out of the conversations that ensued over these and other similar protests, a variety of "goodwill" organizations formed, including the Central Conference of American Rabbis Committee on Goodwill, the American Good Will Union, and the Permanent Commission of Better Understanding Between Christians and Jews. First and foremost among these was the Federal Council of Churches of Christ Committee on Goodwill between Jews and Christians, formed in 1923, which eventually laid the groundwork for the NCCJ.[53] The International Order of

[52] Benny Kraut, "Towards the Establishment of the National Conference of Christians and Jews: The Tenuous Road to Religious Goodwill in the 1920s," *American Jewish History* 77, no. 3 (March 1988): 392.
[53] Kraut, "Towards the Establishment of the National Conference of Christians and Jews," 390.

B'nai B'rith was so pleased with the FCC's Committee on Goodwill, in fact, it contributed $6,000 annually to the committee's budget.[54]

The use of the term "goodwill" in the names of these organizations reveals much about the social and cultural tensions these efforts faced. Goodwill implies an effort to overcome personal animosity; interfaith, in contrast, assumes social acceptance and, rather, connotes cooperation toward shared goals. Goodwill also signifies a superior power's granting of toleration and kindness, whereas interfaith indicates an exchange between equals. In this regard, goodwill was probably an apt term for the 1920s. Many evangelicals in the FCC, in fact, objected to the Committee on Goodwill, noting that its presence might impede their obedience to Christ and his command to make disciples of all people. So, faced with such internal pressures, the Rev. Samuel McCrea Cavert, General Secretary of the FCC, and other leaders of the goodwill movement, decided in the spring of 1927 to spin-off a new, independent body, the National Conference of Jews and Christians. The group reversed the word order in its name in 1938, and in 1998 changed names again, to the National Conference for Community and Justice.

Three co-chairs—Judge Newton D. Baker, a Protestant and former Secretary of War; Carlton J. H. Hayes, a Roman Catholic historian at Columbia University; and Roger Straus, a Jewish financier—assumed leadership of the organization, with the support of an executive committee composed of an assortment of eminent Americans, including Jane Addams, Justices Benjamin Cardozo and Charles Evans Hughes, the Rev.

[54] Kraut, "Towards the Establishment of the National Conference of Christians and Jews," 402.

Henry Sloane Coffin, the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, Mordecai Kaplan, Henry Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, the Jesuit Wilfred Parson, Father T. Lawrason Riggs (the first Catholic chaplain at Yale), Edward A. Filene, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise.[55] The ideology of the group was decisively modern, reflecting new scientific and cultural thinking on the nature of racial and cultural difference—especially the ideas of Franz Boas—and it applied these modern ideas to the thorny problems of religious identity. The Rev. S. Parkes Cadman of Brooklyn, a former Methodist and now renowned Congregationalist preacher, radio personality, Religious Book Club editorial committee member and president of the Federal Council of Churches (1924-1928), articulated the vision of the NCCJ in an address at the National Vaudeville Artists' Club in New York, marking the NCCJ's founding. Cadman, speaking of the categories of race and religion, declared, "There is no dividing line, such as the arbitrary line established by teachers of expiring theological schools. We are upon an entirely new alignment at the present moment, which will eventually have to be respected, because it is on a more scientific basis." The struggle to spread this message, he assured his listeners, is "a common battle, a word war with bloodless weapons."[56] The NCCJ was born of the liberal faith in scientific progress, rational dialogue, and a common humanity.

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[55] The list is compiled from "Aims to Harmonize National Groups," *The New York Times*, December 11, 1927, N1, and Patrick J. Hayes, "J. Elliot Ross and the National Conference of Christians and Jews: A Catholic Contribution to Tolerance in America," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 37, no. 3/4 (Summer/Fall 2000): 321-332.

[56] "Aims to Harmonize National Groups," *The New York Times*, December 11, 1927, N1.

The Presbyterian Everett R. Clinchy, who soon accepted the position as president of the National Conference, a post he held for three decades, carried out Cadman's call to battle outmoded thinking. Clinchy, according to historian Benny Kraut, guided the organization firmly away from any associations with the earlier Americanization controversies and, instead, "popularized an ideology of cultural pluralism." "From the first goodwill initiatives," Kraut writes, "the Protestant goodwill movement of the 1920s culminated with the appearance of an organization that implicitly repudiated Protestant cultural authority in America."[57] Astoundingly, then, the Council on Books in Wartime, in searching for a voice to speak to the religious needs of the vast middle in America, in seeking the nation's spiritual center in this time of crisis, forged an alliance with an organization that powerfully and deliberately sought to undermine Protestant hegemony. Many Jews, and even more notably many Catholics, continued to harbor doubts about the Protestant-led interfaith movement, at once suspecting the motives of Protestant leaders and fearing a loss of their own claim to meaningful distinctiveness.[58] Nevertheless, in many ways the liberal Protestant establishment was turning over the keys to its own castle, and doing so in order to fulfill its own highest ideals and aspirations.

Many of the liberal Protestant leaders who supported the National Conference—including Harry Emerson Fosdick, S. Parkes Cadman, and Samuel McCrea Cavert—

[57] Kraut, "Towards the Establishment of the National Conference of Christians and Jews," 412.

[58] On tensions within the NCCJ see Benny Kraut, "A Wary Collaboration: Jews, Catholics, and the Protestant Goodwill Movement," in William R. Hutchinson, ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

were, at the same time in the late 1920s, founding the Religious Book Club. The RBC was a thoroughly liberal Protestant affair, though always with an openness to books from other traditions that might be of interest to its readership. In the early 1940s, only fifteen years later, another organization these same men helped found, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, began promoting a rather different model of religious reading. No longer a dominant group expressing occasional interest in learning about other faiths—a model of tolerance—the new reading model reflected a growing sense of pluralism, with the three great American faiths, Protestantism (meaning liberal Protestantism), Roman Catholicism, and Judaism, placed on equal footing, side by side, for the American public and American readers.

The NCCJ's other major wartime publicity campaign, Brotherhood Week, exemplified this notion of three equal, and equally American, expressions of faith. Brotherhood Week, begun as Brotherhood Day in 1934 and expanded to a week-long event in 1939, grew out of a barnstorming tour of NCCJ leaders Rabbi Morris Lazaron, Father John Ross, and Rev. Everett Clinchy in 1933, and quickly grew into the organization's signature event.[59] The highly accomplished posters the National Conference commissioned for Brotherhood Week depicted themes of patriotism, unity, and equality (Figure 4.4). The 1943 poster featured a large central shield, emblazoned with the stars and stripes of the American flag. Upon the shield rested a modern, streamlined American eagle, and behind the shield, two swords and two battle-axes. The message of the poster, "Brotherhood: America's Shield Against Intolerance and

[59] Pitt, *Adventures in Brotherhood*, 88-107.

Oppression," made explicit what the imagery already said—a united America was a stronger America. Nowhere did the poster portray any symbols of the various faiths; America at war was without division. The poster from 1945, as victory seemed inevitable, sought to combat the fracturing that many feared would occur once wartime pressures lifted. This poster depicted Christians and Jews each as literal cogs in the machine of teamwork, working together for the common good, as the tag line read, "In Peace As in War." In the National Conference of Christians and Jews the liberal Protestant establishment had transcended itself, forging a truly interfaith body. Though not free from tension, it nevertheless presented an authoritative voice for cooperation, respect, and mutual understanding. And that body was now poised to guide the wartime religious reading of the nation.

Religious Book Week (1943-1948)

The National Conference emphasized these same themes—unity, equality, democracy, and patriotism—and applied them with the same marketing sophistication in its annual Religious Book Week campaigns. The NCCJ borrowed the idea for a Religious Book Week not only from the Religious Book Week of the 1920s, but also from a smaller event held in Boston in 1942, and now adapted these models for its own purposes. The 1942 book week had been organized by a Boston Unitarian minister and denominational leader, Albert C. Dieffenbach, in conjunction with Beacon Press (the

Unitarian publishing house) and the leading Boston newspapers.[60] The NCCJ's book efforts, beginning with its first Religious Book Week, held March 28 to April 3, 1943, were much larger undertakings, both because of the National Conference's decision to take the idea nationwide, and because of the involvement of the Council on Books in Wartime. The extensive marketing infrastructure of the Council disseminated the National Conference's message and book lists across the nation, eventually enlisting schools, libraries, churches and synagogues, government agencies, unions, and booksellers in its massive undertaking.

The Council's involvement certainly helped spread the word, and such involvement was not without its measure of influence. In a spring 1943 press release detailing its activities and cooperation with the Council, the NCCJ reflected its adherence to the spiritual and intellectual uplift goals at the heart of the Council's mission. "The Council on Books in Wartime is working with the National Conference on this important project, which is designed to further the reading of religious books by lay men and women," it declared. The announcement continued: "Religious Book Week has received the very hearty approval and endorsement of religious leaders of the three faiths. Wartime offers an opportunity to stress the importance of religion in our national life and to stimulate an intelligent understanding of it."[61] The experts assembled to craft the lists

[60] A small collection of documents pertaining to Rev. Dieffenbach's involvement in the Religious Book Weeks of the 1940s are located in the Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Cambridge, MA.

[61] "Religious Book Week" press release, 1943. Council on Books in Wartime Collection, Box 18, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University. Used by permission of the Princeton University Library.

would decide for readers exactly what "intelligent" meant—socially tolerant, open to the teachings of science and historical criticism, concerned with literary standards, and spiritually cosmopolitan.

No one embodied high literary standards, public-mindedness, and a liberal, tolerant spirituality more than Dr. Henry Seidel Canby, and so, when the National Conference organized its gala event in March 1943 to mark the opening of its first Religious Book Week, it turned to the elder statesman of American middlebrow culture to act as master of ceremonies. Dr. Canby, by then in his mid-sixties, served as an advisor to the Council on Books in Wartime and the Office of War Information, in addition to his work as editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature* and chairman of the book selection committee of the Book-of-the-Month Club.[62] Though raised an Episcopalian and married in a Presbyterian church, this former Yale English professor returned to the faith of his ancestors as an adult, as he began to see himself having "an essentially Quaker turn of mind." "The Quaker doctrine of an 'inner light'," writes Joan Shelley Rubin, "gave Canby . . . a model of the self—quiet, serene, radiant with spiritual integrity—that he retained throughout his career."[63] Son of a wealthy Wilmington banker, he completed his PhD at Yale in 1905 and began to teach, but quickly became disillusioned with academic life. Canby's Quaker spiritual sensibilities and harsh criticisms of modern life—

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[62] Historians Joan Shelley Rubin and Janice Radway describe Canby as the dominant force at the Book-of-the-Month Club for most of the years from the club's founding in 1926 to Canby's retirement in 1956. See Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); and Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[63] Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 110, 111.

"the vulgarities of signboards, cries of cheap newspapers, noisy hustle of trivial commercialism, and the flatness of standardized living," as he put it in 1922—led him to pursue, with missionary zeal, the spiritual and intellectual uplift of the American public by bringing the right kinds of books to the masses.[64] The opening gala for Religious Book Week, presented before an overflow crowd at the Times Hall on 44th St. (the same venue where the Council on Books in Wartime held its opening conference the preceding May), featured Dr. Canby presiding over a series of lectures from such notables as George N. Shuster, president of Hunter College and editor of *The World's Great Catholic Literature* (1942), and Rabbi Milton Steinberg, author of *The Making of the Modern Jew* (1943). In addition to attending the presentations, attendees were also encouraged to wander through an exhibit hall displaying copies of all two hundred recommended books, fifty from each tradition and fifty "good-will" titles.[65]

The NCCJ printed its approved book list in pamphlet form, divided into four broad categories—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Good-Will—each chosen by a distinct committee of representatives from the tradition, or in the case of the Good-Will list, representatives from each of the traditions. These lists were then subdivided into an adult list of forty titles, and a young people's list of ten titles, for a total of eight distinct lists. These two hundred selections formed the official reading list for each Religious Book Week. In 1943 the National Conference's reading list was sent to over six thousand public, university, and school libraries across the nation; libraries and booksellers were

[64] From Canby, *Definitions: Essays in Contemporary Criticism,* as quoted in Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 116.
[65] "Meeting to Observe Religious Book Week," *The New York Times*, March 30, 1943, 19.

also offered an accompanying poster and bookmark. To further market the campaign, the NCCJ arranged for radio spots and for the lists to be published in major newspapers across the country. *The New York Times*, for example, ran the lists in their entirety across nearly four full pages on the first day of the event.[66]

The National Conference's approach to book selection drew heavily on the conventions of religious middlebrow culture, especially the simultaneous focus on accessibility and enrichment. The 1944 pamphlet, which ran to twenty-eight pages, was typical, and the introductory commentary for each section of the list reveals the list-makers' notion of the selections' intended audiences and uses. Overall, the books were chosen almost exclusively from in-print titles available at bookstores, with "the aim . . . to select books of interest to the average layman."[67] The committee responsible for the Jewish Book List noted, too, that "the list was intended primarily for the intelligent layman and not for the specialist or the scholar."[68] The Protestant committee chose its list, it wrote, with "the busy reader" in mind, one who was "seeking . . . religious literature which will be clear, helpful, vital. . . ."[69] Only the Catholic committee dared stray from the narrow path of accessibility, advising potential readers that "[m]ost of the books are

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[66] "Works of Permanent Value Selected for Religious Book Week," *The New York Times Book Review*, March 28, 1943, BR7.
[67] "Forward," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1944, 3. The complete collection of Religious Book Week pamphlets is located in Box 6, Folder 21, National Conference of Christians and Jews Records, Social Welfare History Archive, University of Minnesota.
[68] "Jewish Book List," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1944, 5.
[69] "Protestant Book List," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1944, 15.

not particularly easy reading. They are serious, thoughtful presentations of deep truths." Yet, the Catholic committee was quick to add in the spirit of expert guides, the books chosen were nevertheless "worth the time and effort it will take to assimilate them."[70] The Catholic committee's willingness to impose greater demands on its readers reflected, perhaps, a greater comfort with hierarchical control of instruction and doctrine; nevertheless, as with the other selection committees, it hewed closely to the conventions of middlebrow reading, choosing books that would appeal to the average reader and yet somehow improve that reader at the same time. In general, each of the Religious Book Week selection committees strove to find the fine balance between expert guidance and respect for middle-class busyness and autonomy.

Religious Book Week, however, was not simply a literary exercise in reading for the sake of reading, as if any appropriately sophisticated book would do. Just as the Religious Book Week of the 1920s and the Religious Book Club aimed not only to encourage the reading of quality books but also to promote a certain kind of religious outlook through the reading of those books, so too the NCCJ's Religious Book Week aimed to transform readers spiritually through encounters with books. Chosen by an organization with an explicit religious agenda—interfaith understanding—and championed as an instrument of national policy in the midst of the titanic struggle of war, the kind of reading promoted by Religious Book Week was inevitably more socially and politically engaged than the reading of the earlier efforts. In fact, the 1943 press release

[70] "Catholic Book List," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1944, 10.

announcing Religious Book Week, which noted "the importance of religion in our national life," might seem to indicate that the reading lists focused almost exclusively on sociological, historical, and political subjects—and, indeed, the lists for all six years of the campaign covered these subjects extensively. [71] The 1944 reading recommendations, for example, contained *The Jews in the Medieval World* (1938), *Economics and Society* (1939), Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* (1930), Kenneth Scott Latourette's *The Unquenchable Light* (1941), and Reinhold Niebuhr's two-volume *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941-1943). These were books chosen in the best tradition of middlebrow culture; they were chosen to make the "average layman" better than average.

Alongside books designed to feed the mind and expand one's sense of the world, the NCCJ committees selected books meant as food for hungry hearts. Central to the book week project was the clear understanding that a thriving pluralistic democracy required not just better informed citizens, but better formed citizens, citizens with spiritual and moral as well as intellectual maturity and sophistication. The National Conference of Christians and Jews, through its book lists, followed therefore in the tradition of previous religious reading campaigns and sought to provide spiritual sustenance for the living of life in addition to greater knowledge about the world. Thus the 1944 Protestant list included, in addition to Maritain, Latourette, and Niebuhr, popular fiction, such as Lloyd C. Douglas's *The Robe* (1942), about a Roman soldier who won Christ's garment after his crucifixion; Sholem Asch's *The Apostle* (1943), a telling of the life of St. Paul; and Franz Werfel's *The Song of Bernadette* (1942), which recounts the

[71] "Religious Book Week" press release, 1943.

story of a French peasant girl's religious vision, and which was made into a popular feature film. (*The Robe* and *The Apostle* were also highly sought-after Armed Services Edition titles.) Alongside these works of popular inspirational fiction stood familiar works in psychological and mystical spirituality, books that previous reading programs had championed as providing a universal basis from which to speak about human nature and human encounters with the divine. This was the same national spiritual center as envisioned by a generation of religious liberal book promoters throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The spiritual universalism of these earlier reading programs provided the foundation for the National Conference's efforts in the 1940s, including its ambitious new undertaking in interfaith understanding.

The Protestant reading lists, not surprisingly, showed this attention to the psychological and the mystical most strongly. The 1943 committee, for example, comprised of Halford Luccock of Yale Divinity School; P. W. Wilson, book reviewer for *The New York Times*; and Walter Russell Bowie of Union Theological Seminary in New York, developed a reading list divided nearly evenly between books in church history or current social problems, on the one hand, and personal inspirational works, on the other. *Abundant Living* (1942), from the acclaimed missionary and author E. Stanley Jones, and *Living Creatively* (1932), by the social activist Kirby Page, made the cut. More explicitly mystical were Rufus Jones's *Pathways to the Reality of God* (1931), Dean W. R. Inge's *Personal Religion and the Life of Devotion* (1924), Evelyn Underhill's *Worship* (1937), and Douglas Steere's *Prayer and Worship* (1938). The committee praised these books as "readable,"

"practical," and written "in a form the average reader can understand."[72] Also chosen were more narrowly psychological works, such as James Gordon Gilkey's *Solving Life's Everyday Problems* (1930), Carroll A. Wise's *Religion in Illness and Health* (1942), and Leslie Weatherhead's *Psychology in Service of the Soul* (1930). In 1944, Rufus Jones's *New Eyes for Invisibles* (1943), Harry Emerson Fosdick's *On Being a Real Person* (1943), and Henry C. Link's *The Return to Religion* (1936) were the most celebrated such texts similarly featured, but that year's list also included the less well known *The Self You Have to Live With* (1938), by Winfred Rhoades, described as an "informal discussion of the contribution of mental hygiene and religion to a satisfying personal life," and *What is Religion Doing to Our Consciences?* (1943), the latest contribution from psychologist George A. Coe.[73] Many of these selections, culled from the previous quarter century, had been at one time primary or alternate selections of the Religious Book Club, and were now finding a new use, in service to the country, as aids to national spiritual strength and unity in a time of war.

The Jewish and Catholic lists, in 1943 and in each of the subsequent years, likewise promoted edifying texts for the betterment of their readers. But rather than attend to mystical and psychological forms of spirituality with their universal pretensions, which arose in the United States in the distinctive milieu of liberal Protestantism, these selection committees chose works designed to help clarify their own traditions, boundaries, and distinctiveness. The interfaith project may have been inaugurated as a

[72] "Protestant Book List," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1943, 12-13.
[73] "Protestant Book List," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1944, 17.

liberal Protestant endeavor on liberal Protestant terms, but Jewish and Catholic cultural arbiters made sure that as their communities joined, they would not lose their way. While just as committed to the wartime goals of national spiritual unity as their liberal Protestant colleagues, Jewish and Catholic leaders nevertheless worked simultaneously to maintain the vitality of their own separate traditions. So the 1943 Jewish list, selected by a committee chaired by Louis Finkelstein of the Jewish Theological Seminary, focused almost exclusively on works of history, biography, contemporary social life, and classics of Jewish literature. History predominated. *The American Jew* (1942), *History and Destiny of the Jews* (1933), *History of the Jewish People* (1941), *Jewish Pioneers and Patriots* (1942), *The Odyssey of a Faith* (1942), *The Jews in Spain* (1942), *Jews in the Medieval World* (1938), *Social and Religious History of the Jews* (1937), and *History of the Jews* (1891-1898) were all chosen in just this first year of the campaign, and subsequent years reflected a similar emphasis. As the Nazi program to slaughter the Jews of Europe proceeded on its awful course, the selection committee of the national Jewish reading list labored to make sure that American Jews would not lose the vital links to their ancient heritage.

The Catholic reading lists also featured heavy doses of history, including, in 1943 and 1944, *Pageant of the Popes* (1942) and *The Story of American Catholicism* (1941), and numerous historical biographies of subjects such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila, Cardinal Richelieu, Bishop John England, Cardinal John Henry Newman, Thomas Moore, and G. K. Chesterton. The Catholic lists, in addition, plunged aggressively into philosophy and theology, with works such as Etienne Gilson's *Christianity and Philosophy* (1939), Jacques Maritain's *Freedom in the Modern World* (1936), and Walter

Farrell's four-volume *Companion to the Summa* (1940-1942). These works of history, biography, and theology, like the books on the Jewish reading list, all reinforced Catholic identity in the midst of wartime pressure toward unity. Finally, the Catholic lists placed a clear emphasis on social teaching, with titles like *Distributive Justice* (1941), a book about "the moral aspects of ownership, capital, profits, and wages in modern economics," *Reorganization of Social Economy* (1936), *The Race Question and the Negro* (1943), and *Morals and Marriage: The Catholic Background to Sex* (1936).[74] Catholic social teaching successfully merged both aims of the Catholic reading list, bringing together claims of Catholic distinctiveness with efforts to overcome inter-group tensions and prejudices. In general, while the Protestant lists stressed ecumenism within Protestantism and the liberal Protestant search for spiritual essences, the Jewish and Catholic list-makers were more willing to choose books that underscored the distinctiveness of their particular traditions of faith.

The centerpiece of the Religious Book Week endeavor, however, was the Good-Will List, the list compiled by representatives from the three faith traditions and designed to be read by members of all. This was the reading list aimed not at furthering religious literacy or bolstering faith in each of the separate traditions—worthy causes, organizers felt to be sure, as seen in the three separate lists—but at crafting the religious unity among the traditions necessary for victory in war and peace at home. This list sought to advance interfaith understanding and to promote awareness of common spiritual ground, a

[74] "Catholic Book List," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1943, 9.

common ground that would form the foundation for American postwar democracy. Nearly all Americans agreed that the American way of life was at stake in the battle with fascism, and Religious Book Week strove to educate the American people that interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and recognition of a shared spiritual heritage were essential to victory in that struggle. The Good-Will lists, therefore, featured heavy doses of social scientific investigations of racial and religious intolerance, histories chronicling the contributions of each group to Western civilization, especially American democracy, and polemics about religious freedom, liberty, and democracy.

Most striking in the Good-Will List is the number of works of social science. *When Peoples Meet: A Study in Race and Culture Contacts* (1944), edited by Alain Locke and published by the Progressive Education Association, offered "768 pages of choice excerpts by experts," while *Race Against Man* (1939), with an introduction by Franz Boas, presented, wrote the 1944 selection committee, "An authoritative and highly readable summary of the scientific findings on the subject of race which shows the error and absurdity of racial prejudice."[75] *Group Relations and Group Antagonisms* (1944), from the Institute of Religious Studies, provided a "scholarly and yet interesting" account of racial and religious interaction, and *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (1942) outlined "A popular interpretation of modern scientific findings about race."[76] Other volumes of anthropology, sociology, and progressive education testify to the underlying assumption

[75] "Good-Will Book List," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1944, 21.
[76] "Good-Will Book List," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1944, 20; "Good-Will Book List," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1943, 16.

that sound scientific study, presented dispassionately to an eager reading public, could effect real social change. This agenda for progressive social science, which dated back to the late nineteenth century, had been championed by liberals in journalism, the churches, and higher education for half a century, and still clearly guided the work of the National Conference of Christians and Jews in the 1940s.

In addition to social science, the Good-Will Lists emphasized the contributions of the various traditions to American civilization and guidebooks for interfaith understanding. These texts all carried a similar larger theme: the three faith traditions of the West each made distinct contributions to American democracy, and interfaith understanding was now critical to the preservation of that democracy. So *Desert Democracy* (1939), from the Methodist publishers Abingdon-Cokesbury, detailed "some principles of democracy as they derived from the Hebrew people," while *Religions of Democracy* (1940) featured contributions from William Adams Brown, an eminent Protestant church historian, Rev. J. Elliot Ross, a Paulist priest and college chaplain, and Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, President of the Jewish Theological Seminary.[77] *Religion and the Good Society* (1943), *Let's Talk it Over: A Manual on Our American Way* (1942), *Get Together Americans* (1943), and *Common Ground* (1938) each offered concrete calls for mutual understanding, again with the idea that such understanding would strengthen the democratic life of the nation. *Common Ground* (1938) aimed to advance not merely social tolerance but deeper religious understanding between Christians and Jews, and *Faith for Today* (1941) featured five

[77] "Good-Will Book List," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1944, 20.

religious leaders, including Swami Nikhilananda, head of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in New York, writing on contemporary social problems. African-Americans were often included as a kind of fourth American religious group, with books such as *Brown Americans: The Story of a Tenth of the Nation* (1943), which chronicled "their share in democracy, their mission and public schools, their spiritual life and Christianity."[78] The Good-Will book list, through these and similar texts, sought not only to reduce bigotry and prejudice, but also to encourage exploration of the mutual benefit of spiritual dialogue.

In all, the Good-Will Lists, the centerpiece of Religious Book Week throughout the 1940s, promoted a vision of religious life in the United States deeply rooted in the liberal Protestant notion of tolerance and dispassionate scientific inquiry as both ethical imperatives and as keys to a successful pluralistic democracy. These had been the motivations of earlier efforts to transcend Protestant sectarianism, leading ultimately to the universalistic spiritual discourses rooted in psychology and mysticism, and these same impulses now led outward, beyond Protestantism. As these efforts assumed the urgency of wartime, a clear identification of American democracy with Judeo-Christian values, rather than simply Protestant values, began to emerge. And with that, the culture of spiritual seeking, so central to liberal Protestantism, was opening up even further, tentatively but irrevocably bringing American religious middlebrow culture into contact

[78] "Good-Will Book List," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1944, 20.

with the insights and practices of other religious traditions, traditions offering new ways of thinking about the self and the divine.

Promoting Religious Book Week: Creating a National Audience for Spiritual Equality

As with the Council on Books in Wartime's own projects, the Council and the National Conference of Christians and Jews heavily promoted their joint Religious Book Week endeavor through a sophisticated, modern public relations campaign. The Conference used its regional offices throughout the country to distribute thousands of book lists, posters, and bookmarks to schools, colleges, libraries, and bookstores. Press releases were sent to major newspapers across the country, which willingly printed nearly verbatim stories describing book week events; in New England, articles and reproductions of the annual poster were carried in French, Polish, Italian, Swedish, Finnish, Lithuanian, and Portuguese papers in addition to the English-language press.[79] Book week promoters arranged for special displays in bookstores, and in San Francisco a number of bookstores reported sending promotional bookmarks to customers with their monthly bills. Museums and archives exhibited rare volumes of religious significance. Newspapers printed the reading lists and magazines highlighted reviews of selected titles. Pat Beaird got into the publicity act himself, using his high-profile "Religious Books and the War" essay from *The New York Times Book Review* to tout the NCCJ's book week.

[79] "Religious Book Week Activities 1944," *Library Journal* 70 (April 1, 1945): 303.

The National Conference coordinated its public relations campaign with a small pamphlet of suggestions for organizations involved in the observance of Religious Book Week. Sent by the thousands all across the country, the pamphlet contained recommendations for clergymen, book editors, newspaper editors, booksellers, public librarians, school and college librarians, and clubs and societies, each group given a number of specific suggestions for aiding the cause of Religious Book Week. In addition to this host of cooperating institutions, the National Conference also coordinated its efforts with government and labor unions. In 1944, for example, a member of the United States House of Representatives brought the campaign to the attention of the country in a speech on the floor, and in later years governors and mayors regularly issued official proclamations of support. By 1947, the fifth year of the book week, the Library of Congress produced an exhibit of "important rare books and manuscripts bearing on freedom of worship" and the Chief of Chaplains of the War Department arranged for dozens of sets of materials to be sent to chaplains in various theaters and departments around the world and to Veterans Administration hospitals and centers across the country.[80] The International Ladies' Garment Workers Union even supplied free kits of Religious Book Week materials to its chapters and libraries. These coordinated efforts gave Religious Book Week a tremendous opportunity to shape the religious reading practices of much of the nation.

The National Conference publicity operation became increasingly sophisticated in the later years of Religious Book Week. For the 1948 campaign the National Conference

[80] "Religious Book Week Starts May 4," *Publishers' Weekly*, April 26, 1947, 2221-2222.

developed a variety of short radio advertisements that ran on stations across the country. A Radio Committee for Religious Book Week organized these activities, chaired by Elinor Inman, Director of Religious Broadcasting at CBS, and including the directors of religious broadcasting at NBC and ABC, the presidents and vice-presidents of various Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish broadcasting associations, and even Red Barber, the famed sportscaster at CBS. Rather than taper off with the end of the war, calls for national spiritual unity only heightened with the start of Cold War hostilities, as the nation now faced the menace of atheistic communism, and the radio spots reflected this renewed sense of urgency. "The perpetuation of American democracy," the committee wrote to radio stations across the country, "depends on adherence by our people to the principle of God-endowed inalienable rights," and Religious Book Week aimed to promote the common faith in God the promoters thought was needed to sustain that democracy.[81] Religious ignorance, according to the NCCJ, threatened these rights. In a one-minute radio spot for Religious Books Week, the announcer noted as well that "Our country was founded on the principle that God created all men equal. Our rights are inalienable because God made them so. What a pity if Americans were to become religiously illiterate . . . ." Gaining religious knowledge might not be easy, this public service announcement told Americans, "But then nothing worthwhile is—Atomic energy, music, the UN, baseball." So pick up a good book, recommended by religious experts, and do your part. "This is a good time to start overcoming our religious illiteracy. This is

[81] "Factsheet: Religious Book Week, October 24-31, 1948." Box 6, Folder 21, National Conference of Christians and Jews Records, Social Welfare History Archive, University of Minnesota.

Religious Book Week."[82] Radio spots of thirty, fifteen, ten, and five seconds made similar pitches, the last stating simply and urgently, "This is Religious Book Week. Read religious books for the answers to the only questions that count forever."[83]

For all the years of the campaign, however, the most significant ally of the National Conference in promoting Religious Book Week were the thousands of public libraries across the country. Professional librarians had, by the early 1940s, over two decades of experience in the selection and promotion of religious reading through the Religious Books Round Table of the American Library Association. This entity, which originated in cooperative efforts among Protestant seminary librarians, had evolved in the 1920s to serve a new function, as the arbiter of appropriate religious reading for public libraries. By the late 1930s the Round Table selection committee had opened up to include Roman Catholic and Jewish members, including, during the war years, Louis Finkelstein, the renowned president of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. This longstanding involvement in the promotion of religious reading, and the recent foray into interfaith religious book selection, made the public libraries ready accomplices in the National Conference's program. The public library branch in Queens, New York, for example, in 1943 simply shifted the basis for its annual spring display of religious books from the list of the Religious Books Round Table to the list from the National Conference

[82] "Spot Announcements and Station Breaks for Religious Book Week, October 24-31, 1948." Box 6, Folder 21, National Conference of Christians and Jews Records, Social Welfare History Archive, University of Minnesota.

[83] "Spot Announcements and Station Breaks for Religious Book Week, October 24-31, 1948." Box 6, Folder 21, National Conference of Christians and Jews Records, Social Welfare History Archive, University of Minnesota.

of Christians and Jews.[84] And just as the reading lists and book clubs of previous decades had helped overwhelmed readers choose the best books, now also, according to Gerald Lawson, a leading librarian, "very few people come to the library with the purpose of reading along certain lines. . . . There is a great need for a readers' advisor in every library, especially in the religious field."[85]

Reports from public libraries around the country indicate that Religious Book Week served just this role, often receiving significant community support. The NCCJ's suggestions to public libraries encouraged them to "enlist all the forces of your community in this observance," "arrange a display," "purchase those volumes which are not on your shelves," "discuss . . . these books in your adult education classes" and otherwise get the word out to the community—and evidently many libraries, from all across the country, eagerly cooperated.[86] The library in Freeport, New York, on Long Island, for example, actively supported the NCCJ program at the behest of the town's Inter-Faith Clergy Council, and borrowed books for its display from local clergy in order to supplement those in the collection. The library held a special kick-off event attended by civic, cultural, and business leaders, at which a local priest, rabbi, and minister spoke

[84] "How Libraries Have Observed Religious Book Week," *Library Journal* 69 (May 1, 1944): 395.
[85] O. Gerald Lawson, "Religious Books in the Life of Today," *Library Journal* 68 (June 1, 1943): 457.
[86] Quotes from "Suggestions for the Sixth Annual Observance, Religious Book Week." Box 6, Folder 21, National Conference of Christians and Jews Records, Social Welfare History Archive, University of Minnesota.

alongside the editor of the county newspaper and an area poet.[87] The public library in Montclair, New Jersey, organized volunteer church librarians to serve as liaisons between the library and the churches, and together with the public librarians these church librarians organized an exhibit and evening program to promote Religious Book Week and distribute copies of the reading list. "The most thrilling thing about that first meeting," recounted public librarian Louise R. Miller, "was its uniqueness in bringing together Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Negroes—just another example of the public library's usefulness to all races and religions."[88]

Public libraries used suggestions and materials from the National Conference to set up elaborate table and window displays. The Cleveland Public Library arranged special exhibits in each of its branches across the city, featuring the poster and book lists displayed in special cases (including a display in the main branch of Adolph Treidler's poster from the Religious Book Week of the 1920s). The main branch also displayed rare books of interest to Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. The library's weekly radio program was also devoted to the subject of religious reading. The Carnegie Library in Atlanta, "[a]s part of its program for promoting the religious tolerance characteristic of true Americanism," enthusiastically supported Religious Book Week from the start, even buying all those titles from the reading list not in its regular collection.[89] The library

[87] "How Libraries Have Observed Religious Book Week," *Library Journal* 69 (May 1, 1944): 392.
[88] "How Libraries Have Observed Religious Book Week," *Library Journal* 69 (May 1, 1944): 392.
[89] "How Libraries Have Observed Religious Book Week," *Library Journal* 69 (May 1, 1944): 394.

mailed copies of the book list to two hundred and fifty Protestant clergy across the city as well as to Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Jewish religious leaders, and even sent the list to the mayor, members of the City Council, county commissioners, officers of the city and county federations of teachers, and local labor leaders. A large display was erected in the main library and posters and smaller displays were featured in each of the branch libraries. Librarians from around the country, including the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, the borough library of Queens, and the Public Library of Port Chester, New York reported significant increases in the circulation of recommended books as a result of the promotional efforts. According to these reports, the increased demand often remained for months.[90]

Religious Book Week Posters and the Spirituality of Wartime Reading

The National Conference of Christians and Jews annually commissioned a poster to serve as the focal point of its promotional efforts, just as the organizers of the Religious Book Week endeavor of the 1920s had (Figure 4.5). These posters were the most visible component of the displays erected in libraries, bookstores, and churches across the country. The posters did not simply draw attention to the books on display, but, as with all forms of advertising, significantly shaped the customers' interaction with the product being advertised. In this case, the posters used to promote Religious Book Week underscored the ideology of equality that drove the National Conference, an equality not

[90] "How Libraries Have Observed Religious Book Week," *Library Journal* 69 (May 1, 1944): 395.

simply in the political and social realms, but a fundamental spiritual equality. The reading practices these posters encouraged of book-week participants entailed, therefore, more than a search for information that might enhance good relations with one's neighbor. Rather, the reading agenda of Religious Book Week steered participants toward a quest for personal spiritual growth stimulated by dialogue with those from other traditions of faith.

It took some time, however, for the publicity behind Religious Book Week to capture adequately this broad interfaith agenda. A survey of the posters over the years reveals an important transition in the thinking behind the book event. The J. Ducas-designed 1943 poster, though with many modern design elements—especially the sans serif font and generous use of blank space—nevertheless indicates a vestigial tolerance model of inter-group relations, rather than the model of pluralism and mutual exchange the NCCJ publicly advocated. This book week, first of all, occurred during Lent, as had the Boston event in 1942 and the book trade's Religious Book Weeks of the 1920s. More strikingly, though, the 1943 poster depicted two books, standing upright, spines forward, bisected by a colored field containing the week's theme, "Tools For A Better World." The composition, then, placed the books and message in the form of a cross, an impression reinforced by the shadow the books/cross cast. This shadow, cast without any apparent source of light, evoked traditional images of Christ's crucifixion as rendered in countless paintings and movies, an image fitting for the liturgical season but out of step with the National Conference's larger purposes. The highly pragmatic message, "books as tools for a better world," squared nicely with the Council's theme of books as weapons,

but this message failed to obscure the essentially Christian symbolism of the 1943 Religious Book Week.

The posters in subsequent years departed significantly from this first effort and more precisely reflected that NCCJ's social and spiritual vision. Visually, the posters became more ornate, with elaborate fonts and depictions of garlands, angels, candles, and Gothic windows; gone was the clean, modern aesthetic of the 1943 design. Yet also gone was the heavy Christian symbolism of the books as cross. Now, the visual rhetoric of the posters, and the message of Religious Book Week in general, became more inclusive. The 1945 and 1946 posters depicted symbols of the three traditions—the Star of David, the Keys of St. Peter (a symbol of the papacy, reproduced on the papal flag), and a simple cross, arrayed equally in height and size across the spines of three books. Beginning in 1944 the book week moved from Lent to the second week of May, a move aimed to coincide with the anniversary of the Nazi book burning of May 10, 1933. An NCCJ press release explained the date change, claiming "it seems fitting that in the United States the week in which this anniversary falls should be dedicated to the reading of books with a spiritual background."[91] Newspapers publicized the changed rationale for the event, usually noting in their headlines the significance of the new dates. Now disassociated from the Christian calendar, the book week became truly interfaith, designed to unite believers and strengthen spiritual resolve in support of the war effort.

[91] "Religious Book Week" press release, January 10, 1945. Council on Books in Wartime Collection, Box 18, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University. Used by permission of the Princeton University Library.

Book week organizers altered the event's theme, too, devising a new slogan, "Read Books Of Spiritual Value," that succinctly encapsulated the drive behind the entire program. The first poster to incorporate the new slogan, the 1944 poster, was designed by a student at New York's School of Industrial Art. The most accomplished of these later posters was created by Michael Gross, proclaimed by *Publishers' Weekly* to have been "inventor of the book poster" in the 1910s, and author of an influential 1948 treatise, "Book Windows That Sell."[92] Gross's technical accomplishment in his 1947 and 1948 posters highlighted the NCCJ's revised theme, no longer about a pragmatic search for a better world, but instead emphasizing personal development. In Gross's symbolism, an open book, apparently on the lectern of a house of worship, represents not just the Bible—the common property and source of unity of the three traditions—but also the sacredness of all reading. The implication—shared with the Council on Books in Wartime and the entire culture of middlebrow reading—was clear: spiritually uplifted individuals, ennobled by quality reading, formed the bulwark protecting American democratic values.

In many respects the Religious Book Weeks of the 1940s contrast significantly with the Religious Book Weeks of the 1920s. Those earlier endeavors were essentially commercial undertakings, launched by the book trade itself to stimulate sales. Though not without higher motives—many in the book business saw themselves as cultural

[92] See "Take A Bow: Michael Gross," *Publishers' Weekly*, December 30, 1963, 23-28, and Michael Gross, "The Principles of Good Window Display," *Publishers' Weekly*, November 6, 1948, 1962-1967. Gross created other innovations in book promotion, including the giant book.

ambassadors in the 1920s, and shared with Henry Seidel Canby a disdain for naked entrepreneurial ambition—the men behind the earlier book weeks nevertheless devised their campaign as a response to changing economics in the book business, and only secondarily as a cultural or missionary endeavor. This was obviously not so with the wartime efforts of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, a group for whom books were not a business but simply "tools for a better world."

Similarly, the two book weeks emphasized different key words, words with great meaning for a rapidly changing culture. The key word of the 1940s Religious Book Week, especially after 1943, was "spiritual," as in the slogan, "Read Books Of Spiritual Value." During the book weeks of the 1920s the key word was "character," with slogans such as "Religious Books Build Character," "Good Books Build Character," and "Good Books Are Life Teachers." This word, character, and the images in the 1920s posters—a Gothic cathedral, a bust of Lincoln, a Victorian family—demonstrate a profound nostalgia for nineteenth century village life and the perceived virtues of an era the obviously ambivalent, modern bookmen who ran it had known as children. Intriguingly, the earlier book posters almost never featured images of a book itself, instead focusing on the context of book reading or its potential effects. The industry insiders behind the 1920s book campaign were reluctant to overtly hawk their wares, striving to maintain a sense of their work as a literary and spiritual calling precisely because of its obviously—and increasingly—commercial character. In the more urgent context of the 1940s, the National Conference, itself not in the book business, showed no such reluctance, and featured the image of a book in each of the five posters it commissioned. "Character,"

these posters seem to say, must be found not just in books but in family, community, church, and nation, whereas "the spiritual" happens in the solitary encounter between reader and text.

The development in the United States of a full-fledged consumer culture, charted by historians such as Warren Susman, Richard Wightman Fox, Jackson Lears and many others, and the related cultural emphasis on personality, rather than character, as the key marker of personal distinction, helps make sense of the central focus on "spiritual value" in the second Religious Book Week campaign. By the 1940s, with this transition now decades further in the past and the nation in the midst of a very real and very present crisis, the new generation of religious book promoters focused more intensively on self-realization than self-sacrifice. Values associated with character—duty, honor, sacrifice, manhood—certainly remained central to wartime propaganda, so the major religious book campaign of the period was free not to stress these values, but to focus instead on the more individualistic, intimate, and feminine notion of "the spiritual." Even that aspect of the National Conference's efforts that did invoke community values, its emphasis on brotherhood, or "good-will" between groups, did not call on individuals to sacrifice for the common good, but rather to develop themselves into the sort of thoughtful and sensitive persons who transcended petty prejudices. Susman's reading of beauty, health, and manners guides led him to the conclusion that the culture of personality "stressed items that could be best developed in leisure time" and that lacked

the gravity of matters of character.[93] But a look at the Religious Book Week offerings indicates a greater seriousness than Susman recognized. Certainly the personality traits Susman describes might aid in career advancement or romance, yet the NCCJ's selections, though also aimed at the "average layman" and the "busy reader," were deadly serious. These were books chosen to be "weapons" and "tools," preparing the reader to make his or her contribution to the all-encompassing war.

Notions of personality and spirituality, moreover, were intimately linked in the popular religious framework advanced by liberal Protestantism in the mid-twentieth century. From William James and Rufus Jones to Glenn Clark, Emmet Fox, and Henry C. Link, and from the Religious Book Week of the 1920s to the offerings of the Religious Book Club throughout the late 1920s and 1930s, and down to the very books promoted by the National Conference in its own Religious Book Week, liberal religious thinking had aggressively advanced psychological science—the scientific understanding of the human self—as a path not simply to worldly happiness, but to spiritual enlightenment. This line of inquiry soon produced two of the most significant popular works on spirituality and the development of personality in the twentieth century, Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick's *On Being a Real Person* (1943) and Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman's *Peace of Mind* (1946). Each of these books was a book week selection. The Religious Book Week of the National Conference of Christians and Jews arose out of the liberal Protestant good-will movement and the wartime call for national unity. Supported by

[93] Warren I. Susman, "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture," in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), 280.

government—local, state, and federal—as well as public libraries, schools, labor unions, community organizations, churches and synagogues across the nation, it became for a brief period in the mid-1940s the official arbiter of the nation's ambitious program of self-improvement through religious reading.

CONCLUSION: FREDERIC G. MELCHER'S "COMMON FRONT"

The Second World War placed unprecedented spiritual demands on the American people. For the first time in history, Americans were asked by governmental, religious, and cultural leaders to come together across racial and religious lines for the good of the country in a time of war. Previous wars, most notably and recently the First World War, had heightened internal divisions, including the ethnic divisions so closely tied to religion; the NCCJ ultimately grew out of efforts to heal the social wounds of World War I. The Second World War, too, of course, proved divisive in its way, not only and most shamefully in the internment of Japanese-Americans on the West Coast, but also in the rank hypocrisy of racial segregation amid yet another war for democracy, and in the pronounced shift away from the economic goals of the New Deal and toward the new focus on inter-group cooperation as the essence of Americanism.[94] Nevertheless, the Second World War fostered a culture, if not always a reality, of national consensus, and reading campaigns, especially religious reading, played a key role in defining what this

[94] In this last vein see especially Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). See also Gary Gerstle's helpful overview essay, "The Working Class Goes to War," in Erenberg and Hirsch, eds., *The War in American Culture*.

consensus might look like. Religious reading programs since the 1920s had advocated for a new spiritual vocabulary, rooted in the liberal Protestant discourses of psychology and mysticism, as the means of overcoming narrow sectarianism. Now, in the crisis of war, good will between religious groups became the publicly advocated religious ideal, and so the search for a spiritual center added a new interfaith dimension.

Leaders of the book business worked with allies in the liberal religious establishment to coordinate the massive effort to get Americans reading, and reading the right kinds of books. Men like Pat Beaird and Everett Clinchy, and women like Ellen O'Gorman Duffy, toiled diligently in the day-to-day struggle to bolster the spiritual defenses of the nation through religious reading. Standing at the apex of bookmen in the 1940s was Fredric G. Melcher, just as he had stood for nearly two decades. Long-time editor of *Publishers' Weekly* and the driving force behind the Religious Book Week of the 1920s, Melcher worked tirelessly throughout the war on behalf of both the Council on Books in Wartime and the National Conference of Christians and Jews. From long years of experience in these various capacities, Melcher held a unique stature to speak to—and speak for—the American book industry. As his business adapted to the demands of wartime, Melcher drew the connections between the war, reading, and matters of the spirit.

Melcher saw more clearly than any other bookman the emerging relationship between the good-will efforts of the National Conference and the modern literature of soul care that had been the main thrust of liberal Protestant book efforts since the early 1920s. In a March 1943 editorial on "Religious Books for the Times," Melcher

commented, as did Pat Beaird and others, on the rising tide of faith and religious reading. "So great are the issues of our time, so small does man feel in the midst of them, that it is inevitable he should seek for new strength and new faith," Melcher wrote. "Both those who face risks on foreign fronts and those who endure anxieties at home are finding a reason for turning to religious literature for inspiration and confidence." What kinds of books might these be? "Books of consolation," of course, as Americans confronted the tragedies of war, but also, more generally, "books on personal religion," for "[t]hough all these days are full of action and common endeavor, men can be lonelier than in the calmer years and far more earnest in the effort to think things out."[95] Ordinary readers, whether at home or abroad, earnestly seeking to "think things out"—this is what Melcher saw as the war's stimulus to faith, and these are the needs he implored his fellow bookmen to meet.

For Melcher to imagine that those facing crises of the spirit desired to "think things out" reflected the prevailing assumptions of liberal religion, the kind of faith that Melcher shared with most of his peers in the book world. Those who directed the Council on Books in Wartime and the National Conference of Christians and Jews all shared the notion that intellect and spirit worked together in the pursuit of human advancement. The erudition of Henry Seidel Canby was matched by his Quaker reliance on the leading of the "inner light," and Melcher turned to the fellowship of the Unitarian Church of Montclair, New Jersey, for his spiritual sustenance. At various times he served

[95] Frederic G. Melcher, "Religious Books for the Times," *Publishers' Weekly*, March 13, 1943, 1179.

as superintendent of its Sunday school and chairman of its board of trustees. In earlier decades, the liberal effort to think through one's faith entailed historical and literary study of the Bible, investigations of church history and theology, and especially the application of modern science to moral, social, and personal problems. This was the agenda of Melcher's first Religious Book Week, of the Religious Book Club, and of the American Library Association's Religious Books Round Table.

By the close of the war, however, Melcher saw that the trade winds had shifted, and a new breeze was blowing. The new climate was Protestant, Catholic, and Jew. In a February 1945 editorial, "Religion on a Common Front," Melcher articulated a broadened agenda for religious books in this rapidly changing world. Millions of Americans, at home and overseas, he noted, had faced great suffering, hardship, and death, and "have learned how one finds strength from his own faith." With this fresh evidence of the power of faith, Americans were ready to face the challenges to come. "No one can be satisfied with the world as we have built it," he claimed. "A better world of the future must be raised. . . ." In crafting this world, Melcher told his audience of industry insiders, "[p]ublishers and booksellers have a special opportunity," for "every church has a literature which throws light on 'the big problems of human life.'" To these books we must turn, he advised, as businessmen aware of the demands of the market, as patriots, and as those charged with the special responsibility of bringing books to people in need. "This literature of applied religion," he exhorted, "should be used as a common heritage just as sacred Scriptures have been used as a common source of spiritual

strength."[96] The unity of "every church," an imperative now for building the peace just as surely as it had been an imperative of war, demanded a modern faith, rooted in a "literature of applied religion." The undertakings of the 1940s would be built on the success of the 1920s and 1930s; religious unity would arise from this "common heritage" in the modern techniques of soul care.

Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, Melcher was well aware, in spite of all their differences, had always found some common ground at least in shared sacred texts. Now, as the war brought Americans of differing faiths closer together than ever, Melcher envisioned finding a new common ground, a modern common ground, in a "literature of applied religion." In daring to speak in terms of a "common front" and a "common heritage," Melcher betrayed the assumptions he shared with many of his fellow liberal Protestants, especially those in positions of cultural authority—that their experiences, values, and desires represented those of the nation. Few African-American Baptists, or southern Pentecostals, or Orthodox Jews—not to mention members of the still exotic faith traditions of Asia or of the myriad smaller traditions born in America—would find much application for the "literature of applied religion" Melcher proposed as the basis for the new common front. But the relationship to books and the kind of spirituality Melcher and other leaders envisioned for that center nevertheless proved to have lasting implications for much of American religious life in the years to come. The war and early postwar years witnessed the first fruits of this marriage of liberal Protestant spirituality

[96] Frederic G. Melcher, "Religion on a Common Front," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 17, 1945, 827.

and interfaith understanding. The bestselling works of religious inspiration would come in the familiar languages of psychology and mysticism, now spoken with the inflections of Jewish and Catholic voices.

Chapter 5: Reading in the Wake of War: Psychology, Mysticism, and the Rise of Interfaith Spirituality

Elisha Atkins graduated from Harvard College *magna cum laude* in 1942, and immediately signed up with the Marine Corps. He served in the Pacific theater and returned wounded, having fought at Cape Gloucester in New Guinea, the only combat he saw in his few months of service; after his injury and return stateside, Atkins continued service in the Marine Corps Reserve. Brief as his tour overseas may have been, it lasted long enough for this thoughtful young man to form a keen awareness of the spiritual struggles of those with whom he served. In "A Soldier's Second Thoughts," written only months after the war's end, Atkins quickly dismissed the "false optimism" of those who championed the war as a boon to faith. "[T]he too easy identification of a fox hole variety [of faith] with the principles of a real and creative faith," Atkins remarked, "is a dangerous obstruction" to understanding the deeper basis of true religion. Yet, Atkins continued, "life in the service, despite the boredom, mud, and tragedy, has given something to those who shared it which perhaps no other human experience could have supplied"—a sense of shared endeavor, for goals both mundane and profound, that will never be forgotten. While acknowledging, "war is a savage teacher," he nevertheless granted that "perhaps there is the slow and steady growth of a real religion in some of

those brought face to face by personal tragedy with the compulsion and the necessity to believe."[1]

Conflicted as Atkins was about the war's power to shape personal faith, he expressed no doubts as to the spiritual needs of those now returning from combat. "I believe that the only form of religion which will be able to permanently satisfy the minds and spirits of men who have seen this present struggle in all of its sordidness, confusion, and horror," he asserted, "is one which can find real answers through new and spiritually creative paths to the vital problems of life. . . ." He continued:

> War has brought millions of men face to face with personal tragedy too deep for any words to utter. It has brought men the realization that there is something brute and irrational in the world to which we have given the name evil. . . . [M]any will come from this conflict less religious because the faith which religion demands is a constant struggle with the forces of doubt and disillusionment, and wisdom is not always born of suffering. Anything less than a belief which arises from man's most persistent questions as to the nature of life, which answers those deep-seated desires to make the world more meaningful, will not be enough.
>
> Religion thus ceases to be metaphysical speculation and becomes a force in the lives of men for, in the final word, religion is not an affair of the head: the heart has reasons which the head does not know.[2]

Therefore, Atkins concluded, "The question which will be demanded of religion is, 'does it make a genuine difference in our lives?'"[3]

Atkins's insight about the men returning from combat applied across all sectors of American life in the immediate postwar years. Americans were hungry for a practical faith to meet the very real needs of personal and national recovery, and in their need they

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[1] Elisha Atkins, "A Soldier's Second Thoughts," in William L. Sperry, ed., *Religion of Soldier and Sailor: One of a Series of Volumes on Religion in the Post-War World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), 101, 106, 110.
[2] Atkins, "A Soldier's Second Thoughts," 114-115.
[3] Atkins, "A Soldier's Second Thoughts," 115.

turned to houses of worship in record numbers, sparking a powerful and sustained reinvigoration of institutional religious life in the years after the war. They also turned to books. Atkins's call for "new and spiritually creative paths" matched in many ways the efforts of those at the Council on Books in Wartime and the National Conference of Christians and Jews, men and women like Henry Seidel Canby, Pat Beaird, Ellen O'Gorman Duffy, and Frederic Melcher, to shape reading habits and spiritual lives. Frederic Melcher's call for a "literature of applied religion" met a deeply receptive audience in the hurting men and women Atkins saw reeling from the experience of war. As booksellers and vast numbers of American readers sought to transcend narrow sectarians divisions that often, in this wartime moment, felt petty and insignificant, they turned in records numbers to books arrayed along Frederic Melcher's "common front." Books of spiritualized psychology and applied mysticism, in particular, achieved a remarkable popularity during and after the war. That some of the most successful of these books were authored not by Protestants but by members of other faith traditions indicated a new direction in the spiritual life of the nation.

THE WARTIME REVIVAL IN RELIGIOUS READING

Perhaps the best evidence of wartime and postwar spiritual seeking comes from data gathered by booksellers and publishers themselves, data that reveal a true renaissance in religious book sales that surpassed even the boom years of the 1920s. Surveys conducted in the early years of the war found those in the business astonished by the changes they witnessed around them. In March 1943, the same month Pat Beaird

wrote "Religious Books and the War" in *The New York Times* and the National Conference of Christians and Jews launched its first Religious Book Week, industry leaders in New York sent questionnaires to booksellers across the nation to assess the war's impact on religious book sales. The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention reported 1942 sales running 29 percent ahead of 1941, and 1943 already 31 percent ahead of 1942. A bookstore manager in Alabama reported his best sales in religion in sixteen years, and one in Florida his best in the previous eight; all agreed that the new sales were coming from "laymen" or "the man in the street." As one respondent reported, "it is apparent . . . [that] people who never read a religious book, or a book with religious implications[,] are taking time to temper their thinking with inspirational and devotional literature."[4] By April 1943 *Publishers' Weekly* could boldly and simply declare: "Reports are consistent that more religious books are being sold this year then ever before."[5] And the following year, in 1944, a follow-up survey found even stronger growth. The Old Corner Bookstore in Boston reported sales in early 1944 50 percent ahead of the record year of 1943, while at the Methodist Cokesbury store in Dallas totals had soared by 300 percent. When asked to identify types of readers and books, respondents again reported the greatest sales in devotional and inspirational titles, which,

[4] From "Current in the Trade," *Publishers' Weekly*, March 13, 1943, 1181-1183. Quote is on page 1182.
[5] "Religious and Inspirational Books Continue Big Sales," *Publishers' Weekly*, April 10, 1943, 1502.

according to the manager at Morehouse-Gorhman booksellers in New York, held special appeal "due, we believe, to the fact that many are beginners in religious reading."[6]

When asked to name specific titles, booksellers indicated Bibles, of course, and devotional books of the type very familiar to Americans for generations, but also certain books indicating important new directions in middle-class spirituality. The most compelling example of continuity in religious reading was the single best-selling inspirational book of the war, a pocket-sized volume of daily devotionals called *Strength for Service to God and Country: Daily Devotional Messages for Those in the Service*, mentioned repeatedly by booksellers across the country as perhaps their hottest title. This little book consisted of three hundred and sixty-five short passages for contemplation, each based on a text from the Christian or Hebrew scriptures, accompanied by a short prayer. (The book also contained four additional devotionals for Good Friday, Mother's Day, Labor Day, and Thanksgiving, each a potentially significant "floating" holiday.) Prominent clergymen such as Daniel Poling of Philadelphia contributed entries, though most contributors were lesser-known clergymen or seminary professors. All were Protestants, with the vast majority Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, or Congregationalist. Conceived and edited by Army chaplain Norman E. Nygaard, the book was shepherded into print by Pat Beaird at Abingdon-Cokesbury, its publisher. Appropriately for a wartime devotional, inside the front cover were pasted the words of the "Star-Spangled Banner," while the back pages made room for the "Pledge of

[6] From "Current in the Trade," *Publishers' Weekly*, February 19, 1944, 861-863. Quote is on page 863.

Allegiance," "America" ("My Country, 'Tis of Thee"), and "America the Beautiful." The book was an instant hit both at home and with the troops abroad, who undoubtedly appreciated its small size and sturdy vinyl cover. Soon the book's sales soared past one million and helped propel Beaird's Abingdon-Cokesbury to the status of the world's largest publisher of religious books. By February 1943 the publisher still reported sales of over eighty thousand copies per month.[7]

The publisher—most likely Beaird himself—wrote a brief introduction, addressing the reader directly. "This book is for you. It is for you alone. Its purpose is to strengthen and sustain you in those troubled hours when you feel a Need that cannot be well put into words," it read. The reader need not fear this book, even those unfamiliar with reading, the introduction reassured, for "[t]hey are simple things, these messages. . . . There is no need for fine writing, for big words and labored sentences when hearts talk one with another." If readers required further assurance that this book would satisfy their unnamed needs, that those who produced it understood their struggles and fears, the publishers casually mentioned "that Dr. Norman E. Nygaard, who conceived the idea of this book and selected its contributors, has himself been called into active service."[8] Then, in the course of the next three hundred and sixty-nine pages, the devotionals themselves straightforwardly addressed the common struggles of those at war: the fear of

[7] Figures come from Nolan B. Harmon, ed., *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 241, and *Publishers' Weekly*, March 13, 1943, 1190. The book remained in print, in various editions, for decades after the war, a testament to its appeal to those not in the service.

[8] Norman E. Nygaard, ed., *Strength for Service to God and Country: Daily Devotionals for Those in the Services* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1942).

death, loneliness, grief, sexual temptation, clashes with authority, and loss of faith. To face these challenges, readers were urged to remember home and family, to pray, to read the Bible, and most of all, to trust in God.

Other than the reflecting the circumstances of the war, Nygaard's hugely popular book deviated very little from the format or basic message of countless other daily devotional titles that had been sold for many decades, such as Scotsman Oswald Chambers's classic *My Utmost for His Highest* (1935). Nygaard's book simply stands as the most prominent example of innumerable other tracts, pamphlets, and devotionals that continued to constitute the bulk of American religious publishing. With its emphasis on service, self-sacrifice, duty, honor, and faith, *Strength for Service to God and Country* reaffirmed the core values of the traditional culture of character. But not far beneath this surface of apparent stability ran swift currents of change, for even as the war stimulated a reinvigoration of older cultural forms, it simultaneously accelerated processes of transformation. If we look beneath the surface, we see new kinds of books gaining prominence—some singled out by the booksellers themselves—that represented newly emerging and increasingly important trends. Social and cultural historians have extensively catalogued the changes war and war mobilization brought not just to the military, government, and economy, but also to areas of American life as diverse as race relations, the status of gays and lesbians, popular culture (especially music), education, the built environment, the fine arts, and organized religion. Those scholars who attend to the spiritual, such as sociologists Wade Clark Roof and Robert Wuthnow, often conduct ethnographic research that takes the 1950s, the postwar world, as the baseline from which

to measure more contemporary developments.[9] However, few have turned their attention to the more intimate arena of private spirituality and the war, though the war's impact here was no less profound than in other areas of culture.

Three texts, each representing a different tradition of faith—Harry Emerson Fosdick's *On Being a Real Person* (1943), Joshua Loth Liebman's *Peace of Mind* (1946), and Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948)—stand out from among the religious bestsellers of the mid-1940s for their combination of immense national popularity, intellectual sophistication, and practical applicability. An examination of the content, print history, readership, and reception of these books, all number-one bestsellers, illuminates precisely these gathering spiritual undercurrents—the role of psychology and mysticism in popular American religion, the increasing centrality of mass-market religious reading in American spiritual practice, and the ever-greater willingness of readers to cross the boundaries of tradition—and how the national experience of war both enhanced and channeled this rising tide of change. Examined together, these texts also reveal both the very real momentum behind the wartime interfaith movement and the fault lines that still remained. Many prominent religious writers, such as Bishop Fulton Sheen, the Quaker philosopher D. Elton Trueblood, and the Protestant leaders of the Federal Council of Churches's Commission to Study the Bases of a Just and Durable Peace, used the opportunity provided by the war to write about matters of great social and political

[9] See Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby-Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), and *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998)

urgency. Some of these efforts even resulted in bestselling books. The works of Fosdick, Liebman, and Merton, however, reached their audiences more personally and immediately, speaking to intimate matters of heart and soul.

The first two of these books, *On Being a Real Person* (1943) by Harry Emerson Fosdick, a leading liberal Protestant, and *Peace of Mind* (1946), by Joshua Loth Liebman, a Reform rabbi, helped bring depth psychology into the religious mainstream. They did this by placing psychological concepts into a liberal religious framework, couched in a religious idiom. The third book, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), by Thomas Merton, a Roman Catholic convert and Trappist monk, is "an autobiography of faith," unlike the other two books, which are how-to guides. Merton's story popularized and humanized matters of mystical experience and practice. Together, these three books presented to the reading public ideas that had been germinating in liberal religious culture since the 1920s, and now emerged after the war with renewed vigor and legitimacy. The dynamic interplay of the new psychology and ancient mysticism accelerated trends in American religious culture already moving toward an experience-based, instrumental, subject-focused spirituality.[10] Modern psychology and mysticism were hardly new in the 1940s, but their presentation in bestselling books, marketed with the techniques of modern middlebrow culture, proved especially potent in speaking to, and in turn shaping, the spiritual needs of millions of wartime and postwar American readers. Their presentation

[10] See, for example, Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979); Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

in forms with wide appeal, while remaining distinctly Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic, reveals the development, for an increasing number of American readers in the 1940s, of a greater openness to spiritual enlightenment from other traditions of faith.

PSYCHOLOGY, MYSTICISM, AND AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY DURING THE WAR

The demands of World War II furthered the movement of psychological and mystical forms of spirituality from the margins of liberal Protestantism to the center. Though various efforts since the 1920s had been undertaken, often with considerable success, to broaden Protestant spirituality, the war nevertheless proved a tipping point. The reading program of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, which gained such remarkable official support and national legitimacy, was one particularly potent vehicle for these liberalizing efforts. But trends within the churches themselves, and the very nature of the war itself, also furthered this transformation. The great struggle against fascist ideology highlighted the need for American spiritual unity, and the horrors of war—the death camps, fire bombings, and atomic mushroom clouds, and the personal traumas of combat and grief—made sectarianism seem petty to many, and compelled many others to search for spiritual resources of comfort and healing.

Since the beginning of the century, American clergymen such as Elwood Worcester and Samuel McComb of the Emmanuel Movement had attempted to incorporate concepts from the new academic psychology into their pastoral work, but the effort did not gain wide acceptance until the 1920s and 1930s, when Fosdick and others began to turn to psychology as a tool in their own pastoral counseling. This trend

eventually resulted in the work of Anton Boisen, Richard Cabot, Charles T. Holman, Seward Hiltner, and others who instituted clinical pastoral training as a routine component of liberal Protestant seminary education. Religious publishing clearly reflected this trend, as a survey of the offerings of the Religious Book Club reveals. Two works of Charles Holman, director of vocational training at the University of Chicago Divinity School, were chosen as main selections of the Religious Book Club: *The Religion of a Healthy Mind* (1939) and *Psychology and Religion for Everyday Living* (1949). "His style is always readable and understandable, avoiding the professional terms that are mysterious to the layman," wrote the committee of his 1949 offering. "The point of departure is the frustrations, anxieties, and defeats which are the common lot of man."[11] More professionally influential was the work of the Rev. Seward Hiltner, a graduate of the Chicago Divinity School and the executive secretary of the Commission of Religion and Health of the Federal Council of Churches. Hiltner's *Religion and Health* (1943), the main selection of the Religious Book Club for January 1943, presented a number of chapters on various methods of pastoral counseling, and addressed the therapeutic value of prayer, worship, and the sacraments. Yet even this book, noted the book club editors, "is most useful for the average reader."[12]

These spiritual pioneers revolutionized the practice of liberal religious pastoral care, and their influence was eventually felt far beyond the churches and seminaries, as the leading historian of the field notes. "The pastoral theologians of the 1930s did a

[11] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, September 1949.
[12] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, January 1943.

considerable amount of stumbling around," E. Brooks Holifield remarks, "but they laid the foundations for a postwar renaissance that would have surprised even them."[13] Henry C. Link, the industrial psychologist, had famously recounted his "return to religion" in the 1930s. During and after the war, through bestselling books, Rev. Fosdick and Rabbi Liebman—two key religious figures of the 1940s psychological awakening—brought this new pastoral counseling to the nation.

Of course it was no mere coincidence that the war years saw the emergence of the two most significant psychological bestsellers to date. The Second World War had prepared Americans to accept a psychological message from their religious leaders; without the experience of war, in fact, Fosdick and Liebman would most likely never have commanded the audiences they did. Depth psychology had been slowly gaining acceptance among cultural elites, secular as well as religious, since just after the turn of the century, but not until mid-century did psychological conceptions of the self gain wide currency. Psychological analysis had been utilized in the First World War—most notably for the one hundred thousand soldiers who were treated for "shell shock"—but in the Second World War psychology truly became a mass endeavor.[14] During WWII, Army hospitals saw one million psychiatric admissions, yet the reach of the psychological and

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[13] E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 221.

[14] The best account of the war's impact on psychology, as a profession and as a force in American culture, is Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 48-123. Nathan G. Hale, Jr. takes up the somewhat narrower matter of psychoanalysis in *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917-1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 187-210.

psychiatric professions extended far beyond the treatment of war trauma. Military officials used psychological assessment as a vital tool in the induction and training processes. By war's end, fifteen million draftees—more than 10 percent of the national population—underwent some form of psychological testing, "most of them encountering psychological logic for the first time."[15] And throughout the war, civilians back home read reports from the front thick with psychological analysis, such as a *Newsweek* story from the Pacific describing "Guadalcanal Neurosis." In a nation gripped by war and enamored of scientific expertise, the psychologist had ascended to an unprecedented cultural status by 1945. "It is hard to believe that a few hundred professionals could change the culture of a nation," notes historian Andrew Heinze, "but that is what happened in the United States after the Second World War."[16]

The dramatic conclusions of the war in Europe and the Pacific only heightened its psychological impact. The advance of Allied forces into Nazi death camps, in April and May of 1945, forced the American public to confront unfathomable brutality in the heart of Western civilization. Stories of Nazi atrocities had circulated widely in the U.S. since 1942, but "[t]he liberations made horrified believers out of the skeptics and brought a new and hideous sense of reality even to those who never doubted the worst."[17] Images from photographers such as Margaret Bourke-White—including those displayed by

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[15] Eva S. Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 102, 105.
[16] Andrew R. Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 202.
[17] Robert H. Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberations of Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 19.

Joseph Pulitzer to throngs in St. Louis—and graphic newsreels shown nationwide made intimate to millions of Americans the worst in human nature. Though most Americans were intellectually able to grapple with these new realities—84 percent believed the reports about Nazi death camps, according to a Gallup poll in May 1945, up from 76 percent in November 1944—many experienced psychological and emotional strains.[18] "Like the soldiers at the camps," writes historian Robert H. Abzug, "those who came upon Belsen and Buchenwald in a newsreel or picture magazine experienced a potent mixture of shock, anger, shame, guilt, and fear. And like the soldiers, they felt a great need for distance and disconnection."[19] Charles Clayton Morrison, the long-time editor of the liberal Protestant *Christian Century*, had been a Holocaust skeptic until he visited the camps himself. In a May 9, 1945, essay in the *Century* entitled "Gazing into the Pit," Morrison reported that all that had been rumored was true, and more. "What can be said that will not seem like tossing little words up against a giant mountain of ineradicable evil?" he asked, knowing full well that no answer could be found for his shock and bewilderment.[20]

This shock, fear, and need for disconnection grew exponentially in August 1945, when the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated a new means of mass extermination that might one day visit American soil. The threat of atomic annihilation meant "that no sentient man or woman can really find peace of mind or body," declared the psychiatrist Jules H. Masserman in an address delivered a year after

[18] Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart*, 10, 39.
[19] Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart*, 170-171.
[20] Quoted in Marty, *Modern American Religion,* Vol. 3, 63.

Liebman's book made the phrase "peace of mind" famous, while the columnist Dorothy Thompson remarked in October 1945 that atomic terror was leading to "a world-wide nervous breakdown."[21] Such was the psychological climate after the war, a climate ripe for the literary pastoral counseling of Fosdick and Liebman.

Mysticism, like psychology, was a critical component of the wartime and postwar spiritual renaissance, and as with psychology, American interest in mystical experience steadily grew in the early twentieth century and spiked with the experience of total war in the 1940s. William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) provided the conceptual categories for a generation of American intellectuals to describe "the ineffable," and his ideas found their way to the wider reading public through fellow students of mysticism, foremost among them the Quaker Rufus Jones. "While I am writing this," Jones observed in a 1942 *Atlantic Monthly* essay on mystical experience, "the world seems to be collapsing into a primitive chaos of revolution and destruction."[22] Yet, he argued, "It is now if ever that we need the voice of those who, 'listening to the inner flow of things, speak to the age out of Eternity.'"[23] Jones concluded with one of his most stirring refrains, calling his readers to a higher life through intimacy with the Eternal. Mystics, Jones wrote,

> are in every church and in no church at all. They are in towns and cities, on country farms, in CCC camps and in the Army. They are laboratory professors and they are college students. They are rich and they are poor. They are good-livers and they are hardy ascetics. But they have, one and all, learned that they do

[21] Quoted in Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 277, 281.
[22] Rufus M. Jones, "Mystical Experience," *The Atlantic Monthly,* May 1942, 634.
[23] Jones, "Mystical Experience," 635.

> not live by bread alone, but have resources from the World beyond the world of space and time, and their "best moments of life" are times of spiritual fecundity, infused by contact with a Beyond.[24]

A vast readership of Americans, both Protestant and Catholic, soon found such a voice in Thomas Merton and his personal tale of redemption and the contemplative life.

We must look beyond this cultural and intellectual history of psychology and mysticism, however, to grasp the full significance of Fosdick's, Liebman's, and Merton's bestsellers. All three texts participated in the same thriving mid-century middlebrow culture that informed the promotional activities of the Council on Books in Wartime, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and more broadly, the outreach efforts of men such as Henry Seidel Canby and Frederic G. Melcher. Fosdick and Liebman each deliberately crafted their texts to reach the same striving, busy, intelligent but average reader who constituted the imagined audience of these book campaigns. Fosdick and Liebman each, in addition, understood their role as expert guides into the sometimes pedantic and technical world of modern psychology. These clergymen, more than anything, wanted to make their own expertise useful to others. And Merton, too, though in a different literary genre, the autobiography, ultimately crafted a book of practical value, a guide by which ordinary men and women could learn the same hard-won lessons that he had won, and apply his lessons to their own struggles. In Frederic Melcher's terms, even Merton's book became, in the hands of its readers, part of the "literature of applied religion."

[24] Jones, "Mystical Experience," 641.

Religious leaders of the era encouraged the reading of religious books as a critical means of spiritual self-improvement, often giving advice not only on *what* to read but *how*. The first aspect of *how* was the encouragement to buy books, with the understanding that an owned book served one better as a tool of spiritual practice than a borrowed book. Buying, then, situated religious life squarely in the consumer marketplace, making faith, in part, a commodity. A second and related aspect of the *how* of reading was the cultivation of the proper stance toward reading. While leaders of the Council on Books in Wartime and the National Conference of Christians and Jews surely acknowledged the benefits of reading for pleasure or diversion, reading for intellectual and spiritual betterment clearly lay at the heart of their efforts. The readers of Fosdick, Liebman, and Merton approached their texts with this same attitude of earnest, practical seeking, and the consequences of this burgeoning religious middlebrow culture were far-reaching. It provided millions of Americans with access to academic theology, psychology, and mysticism, and tied American religious culture ever more tightly to the consumer marketplace. This nexus of print culture and consumerism, stimulated by the reading campaigns of wartime and the nature of the war itself, brought previously esoteric and academic ideas into the mainstream. These forms of psychological and mystical spirituality provided avenues for American readers to venture safely beyond the bounds of their own traditions of faith.

READING LIEBMAN, FOSDICK, AND MERTON

Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman's secretaries were very busy in 1947. His book, *Peace of Mind,* had burst onto the publishing scene in the spring of 1946 and was soon to pass the one million mark and become the best selling nonfiction religious book of the twentieth century to that point.[25] Only thirty-nine years old when the book appeared, handsome, with a silky baritone voice, an engaging prose style, and an agile and retentive mind, Liebman was on his way to celebrity; his sudden death in 1948, at age forty-one, is all that kept him from lasting fame. Before *Peace of Mind* he was already known across New England for his weekly radio sermons. Now, with the astonishing commercial success of this book, his office at Boston's Temple Israel was inundated with letters, mostly from women. Liebman would quickly scan each of the thousands of letters—many heartbreaking, others shockingly confessional—and scribble a brief but personal response in the margin. His staff carefully typed and mailed each of these responses, often with a relevant sermon enclosed.

A Jewish woman from Big Wells, Texas, wrote Rabbi Liebman for help. She was forty-two years old, a college-educated high school teacher, a wife and mother. She had been married for fifteen years to a man whom she "respected very much," but found, as she put it, "the sexual relation almost unbearable." Recently, she had fallen in love with one of her students, a high school senior soon to join the Marines. "I have tried to find something in religion to help me, and I have prayed for guidance and understanding thousands of times, but that has failed," she wrote. "If you cannot help me I do not know

[25] The authority on Liebman is Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul.*

where to turn."[26] A man from Tampa, Florida, wrote to Rabbi Liebman of "an entity from another life or existence," that spoke with him. He had not yet finished reading *Peace of Mind*, but when he had, he assured the rabbi, he would write again to let Liebman know what the entity thought of the book.[27] One wonders, indeed, just what the entity made of this curious bestseller, the first religious book from a non-Christian author to reach a mass audience in the United States.[28] For, despite its title, the book that inspired so many letter-writers was no inspirational pablum. Rather, Liebman presented an account of human nature based on a sophisticated rendition of Freudian psychology. The insights of Freud, Liebman argued, when coupled with personal faith and the wisdom of the Jewish prophetic tradition, offered the best hope for survival, and perhaps, one might dare hope, even happiness, in the troubled modern world. And based on the flood of letters streaming into Liebman's office, it seems many troubled, modern souls in postwar America dared hope right along with him.

Simon and Schuster, Liebman's publisher, advertised *Peace of Mind* widely, but the book's sales, and Liebman's flood of fan mail, probably stemmed more from enthusiastic coverage in newspapers and popular magazines such as *Life*, *Look*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and

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[26] Many of the letters to Liebman and Fosdick contain personal information conveyed to a pastor in confidence. In order to protect the privacy of these correspondents, pseudonyms are used, in the text as well as the notes, when referring to individual readers of Fosdick and Liebman. Edith Fischman to Joshua Loth Liebman, June 23, 1947. From the Joshua Loth Liebman Collection in The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.

[27] Charles Edmonds to Joshua Loth Liebman, August 22, 1947. From the Joshua Loth Liebman Collection in The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.

[28] Excluding, of course, the sacred texts of various traditions, most especially the Bible.

Cosmopolitan. These pieces cemented the book's status as *the* postwar spiritual guide. The *Look* piece focused on Liebman the man, his Midwestern roots, his own experience with psychoanalysis, and his daily professional and personal routines. Carrying the subtitle "Joshua Loth Liebman's best-seller has guided thousands to serenity," the article also included a digest of Liebman's chapter on grief, perhaps the most directly relevant portion to a postwar audience.[29] The *Boston Post* ran a story on Liebman under the banner headline, "Writer of Clean Best-Seller Presents His Views," in which Liebman answered critics and offered his take on the success of his book. Naturally, he pointed to the role of the war in opening American readers to a psychological message, but more personally, he remarked on his place as a Jewish counselor to an overwhelmingly Christian nation. Liebman told the *Post* reporter of the survivors of a deadly fire in Georgia who requested autographed copies of his book. As the reporter recounted: "His eyes moistened, his shoulders sagged a little, as he told about it the other day. 'They are Christian men and women,' he stated softly. 'Here I am, a rabbi and a Jew.'"[30]

Liberal Protestants, by 1946, were already open to psychological insight after decades of pastoral and popular interest, and now, in the wake of the Holocaust of European Jewry, American readers for the first time embraced the spiritual counsel of a rabbi. The war exposed the American public to modern psychology in massive numbers, and the horrors of Nazi crimes and atomic weapons made the promise of psychology

[29] Harold B. Clemenko, "The Man Behind 'Peace of Mind,'" *Look*, January 6, 1948, 15-17.
[30] Mark Hatch, "Writer of Clean Best-Seller Presents His Views," *Boston Post*, June 22, 1947.

seem all the more compelling. Psychology's emergence as liberal religion's *lingua franca* provided a vocabulary for a non-Christian to speak to the spiritual needs of ordinary Americans. Andrew Heinze, in fact, contends that "psychology created a spiritual democracy. As a result, for the first time in nearly two millennia, a rabbi had a solid platform from which to preach spiritual answers to an interfaith audience."[31] The unique credibility bestowed on Liebman as a Jew in the postwar climate only deepened his mass appeal. "By virtue of both his Jewishness and his Freudianism," continues Heinze, "Liebman was taken as an authority on wartime suffering and prejudice."[32] Liberal religious institutions in the United States had been moving toward a greater ecumenism for decades, as exemplified by the Federal Council of Churches and the National Council of Christians and Jews. Even more compellingly, war mobilization itself called on Americans to form a united front against common enemies. Now, in the wake of the war, the nation was ready for this ecumenism to bear fruit in rabbi Liebman's literary ministry.

Liebman's work closely resembled Harry Emerson Fosdick's *On Being a Real Person.* Fosdick, too, had offered Americans an unusually learned mix of psychology and liberal religion, and, like Liebman, was rewarded with a number-one spot on national bestseller lists. While Liebman was a fresh face on the scene of liberal religion in 1946, Fosdick was liberalism's best-known clergyman. Through his Sunday evening radio addresses (never called sermons)—which ran until his retirement in 1946—and through his books, Fosdick brought theological modernism and modern psychology into the homes of millions of

[31] Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul*, 238.
[32] Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul*, 215.

Americans. *Time* magazine estimated at Fosdick's retirement that his books and radio addresses brought him one hundred twenty-five thousand letters a year, a number that would have overwhelmed Liebman's staff of two.[33]

As soon as Liebman's book appeared in 1946, he and Fosdick were linked in the public mind. Liebman had been somewhat dismayed when Fosdick's book first appeared, fearing the eminent churchman's efforts would overshadow his own planned work. Yet he delivered a very favorable sermon on *On Being a Real Person* in April 1943, in which he tied the main themes of Fosdick's work to those he was developing. "Now, if we are ever to be real persons, if we are ever to have genuine peace of mind," he declared, drawing a parallel between the title of Fosdick's book and his own, yet to be published, "we must learn how to believe again—to believe in friendship and human love and social causes and an undergirding, universal mind."[34] He complimented Fosdick for renouncing Puritan notions of the body and original sin, and only politely chided Fosdick for failing to show his readers how to become the real persons he so ably described. Fosdick, in turn, warmly welcomed Liebman's publication, writing the young rabbi, "It is very gratifying and encouraging to know that a book like this is sustaining this preeminent position, and I congratulate you on behalf of the whole religious community. . . ."[35] Yet

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[33] "Fosdick's Last Year," *Time*, June 18, 1946, 56.

[34] Joshua Loth Liebman, "On Being a Real Person": A Discussion of Harry Emerson Fosdick's New Book." Sermon delivered Friday, April 2, 1943. Typescript in the Joshua Loth Liebman Collection in The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.

[35] Harry Emerson Fosdick to Joshua Loth Liebman, April 9, 1947. From the Joshua Loth Liebman Collection in The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.

what most likely sealed the association between the two books in the public's mind was their simultaneous appearance in the 1948 hardbound volume *14 Reader's Digest Books*. [36] *Reader's Digest* offered the largest possible audience a chance to read critical portions of each book side by side.

In the fall of 1948, while *Reader's Digest* was promoting the therapeutic gospels of Fosdick and Liebman, Thomas Merton's autobiography hit the bestseller lists.[37] Merton, like Fosdick and Liebman, transcended the category "religious author" to become a national media phenomenon. Sydney Ahlstrom described Merton as "the American who brought the mystical tradition to full expression," and certainly to its widest American audience yet.[38] The success of Merton's autobiography, which shocked its publisher by remaining at or near the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list for the fall of 1948 and much of 1949, was due as well, no doubt, in large degree to the Second World War, and to many Americans' longing for security, meaning, and spiritual solace in the face of the horrors of war and the potentially greater horrors of the next war.[39] Reviewers frequently referred to Merton as an "atomic age Augustine," and in such troubled times, what better symbol of security and serenity than the monastery? Thomas Merton's book reached these soul-weary Americans with the story of his life transformed by a mystical faith. A

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[36] *14 Reader's Digest Books* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest Association, 1948).
[37] On Merton, the biographical literature is extensive, but most comprehensive is Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).
[38] Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 1035.
[39] The cultural impact of the bomb was immediate. Historian Paul Boyer quotes a critic from *The New York Times* who wrote on August 8, 1945 that the dropping of the atomic bomb was "an explosion in men's minds." *By the Bomb's Early Light*, xxi.

Life magazine article on the *Seven Storey* phenomenon attested to Merton's broad appeal, noting that in many cities more Protestants than Catholics were reading the book.[40] The appeal across tradition was undoubtedly true for Liebman's book as well, as indicated both by its huge sales and by the many letters from non-Jewish readers.

For all the apparent foreignness of this monk's Roman Catholic mysticism to a still predominantly Protestant America, the success of *The Seven Storey Mountain* among Protestants does not, on closer inspection, come as a total surprise. Liberal Protestants such as Rufus Jones had been writing of mystical experience in popular books and magazines for decades, and Fosdick himself, influenced by Jones, often argued that for a liberal faith to remain living, it must make room for personal connection with the divine. Theologian Gary Dorrien considers Fosdick's brand of theological liberalism a kind of "personalism," a school of thought linked to Boston University's Borden Parker Bowne; the term nicely reflects Fosdick's attention to both mystical experience and the study of the consciousness that mediates that experience.[41] Fosdick himself, in fact, may aptly be described as a mystic, as evidenced by his theology of "personalism," his indebtedness to Rufus Jones, and his membership in the Wider Quaker Fellowship, a body founded by Jones in 1936 and open to all "persons who believe in direct and immediate relation between the human soul and God, who are eager for refreshment and inspiration through times of silent communion with God and who [have] faith that there are divine

[40] *Life*, May 23, 1949.
[41] Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

possibilities in all persons. . . ." With pioneers like Jones and Fosdick, Protestant America was prepared for the message of Thomas Merton.

Fosdick's *On Being a Real Person* (1943)

On Being a Real Person, in chapters on "The Principle of Self-Acceptance," "Mastering Depression," and "Handling Our Mischievous Consciences," provides the insights of a literate, compassionate, and insightful writer and pastor. Fosdick opened his book with an anecdote from twenty years earlier, when a young man, in Fosdick's office for counseling, threatened suicide. "Having received my education in pre-psychiatric days," he wrote, "when the academic study of psychology was a very dry and formal discipline, and such matters as mental therapy, so far as I can recall, were never mentioned in college or seminary, I was utterly untrained for personal counseling."[42] This case, he told his readers, propelled him on the twenty-year journey of study culminating in this book. But more than simply explaining the genesis of the book, Fosdick's story casts himself of twenty years prior in the same position as the reader of today, as an unsophisticated but zealous seeker, unlearned but earnest, scouring books and articles for practical guidance in matters of the psyche and the spirit. Through the ensuing chapters, Fosdick becomes a virtual psychological tour guide, introducing his readers to the famous psychologists, theologians, poets, and novelists whose writings had formed his thinking in this autodidactic quest. "Coming as it does out of personal

[42] Harry Emerson Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943), vii.

experience, this book is necessarily as limited and partial as that experience has been," he commented. "Nevertheless, for what it may be worth, here is the story of what one minister has found out about people's 'insides' and what can be done with them."[43]

Fosdick was well known for his love of quotations, with which he abundantly supplied his audiences in his celebrated sermons. Throughout his life he collected the sayings of favorite writers in copious notebooks, and this infatuation with quotes he carried over into his popular books. In *On Being a Real Person* one meets William James and Sören Kierkegaard, Josiah Royce and Ernest Hocking, Henry C. Link and Rufus Jones. Even more, one travels among poets, novelists, musicians, and playwrights, greeting Carlyle, Dostoyevsky, Chopin, and Shakespeare. Fosdick warned his readers, "frequently I have turned to biography and autobiography, and to those novelists, poets, and dramatists who have been, as was said of Shakespeare, circumnavigators of the human soul." Fearing his serious readers would dismiss the quotations and allusions as "decorative," Fosdick reminded his audience that "nowhere are the common frustrating experiences of personal life more vividly described . . . and this rich storehouse of psychological self-revelation and insight has been too much neglected."[44] Fosdick's own story, in other words, which he invited his reader to share, exemplified the transformative power of the very same middlebrow reading culture in which it now participated.

As Fosdick's readers came to recognize, much of the advice he shared reflected nothing more than simple common sense, made authoritative with the vocabularies of

[43] Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, xiv.
[44] Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, xi.

science and faith. Stay rooted in the social networks of friends, family, and community; find happiness in serving ends outside oneself; get plenty of exercise (Fosdick himself was an avid walker). Never abstruse, arcane, or technical, Fosdick's language stayed straightforward throughout; he employed his roster of guides and examples to verify the everyday wisdom his readers already knew. Even when introducing specialized terminology, such as "sublimation" or "projection," Fosdick would illustrate the term with an anecdote from common experience. When discussing the conscience, for example, which he sensibly noted suffers equally often from overdevelopment as from underdevelopment, he related psychological language to the everyday. "When God accused the woman [Eve, in the Garden of Eden, of eating the apple], she said, 'The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.' What we call 'passing the buck' is an ancient process. Modern psychology has a word for this, 'projection.'"[45] At times, he expressed overt hostility to the technical nature of psychology, even as he made use of it. In a chapter on "Shouldering Responsibility for Ourselves," he complained that "psychiatry weighs down our speech with half-understood, ponderous words describing the various *phobias* and *complexes*, so that, as Dr. Henry C. Link says, they become 'a vocabulary of defeat.'"[46] Here one authority is marshaled to combat the language of others, allowing Fosdick to both educate his readers and share in their frustration with excessive intellectualism.

A skillful rhetorician, with years of practice in the raw arena of the pulpit, Fosdick deftly crafted this book to guide his readers while also respecting their autonomy, always

[45] Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, 139.
[46] Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, 19. Italics in the original.

the challenge when providing mass-market expertise in a democratic society. The core ideas in the book he had, in fact, honed in sermons and lectures with his Riverside congregation. Though Fosdick's church members were more prosperous and better educated, in general, than the average reader of his work, the Riverside congregation nevertheless provided direct contact with a live audience that almost certainly improved the style and substance of the book. As far back as 1939, Fosdick had conducted a lecture series at Riverside entitled "Being a Real Person" (also the original title of the book, maintained until "On" was added to the final draft in early 1943). The flyer announcing these lectures, held on successive Wednesday nights in October and November of 1939, noted that with the recent start of war in Europe, "The World-Crisis confronts us with two problems: handling public policy and handling ourselves. With the second of these this series of lectures and questionnaires is concerned."[47] Anticipating the wartime push for religious reading, Fosdick early on drew the link between world events and personal spirituality. His sermons from the period also indicate a testing of the book's central themes. Fosdick spoke, for example, in "The Possibility of Transformed Personality," a radio sermon from 1939, to "anyone who wants to be a real person," and in "Achieving Personal Integrity" in 1941 he outlined for his listeners "what it means to be a real person."[48]

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[47] "Seven Evenings with Dr. Fosdick on 'Being a Real Person'," flyer, Riverside Church Archives, New York.

[48] Harry Emerson Fosdick, "The Possibility of Transformed Personality," National Vespers sermon, May 14, 1939. Typescript in Riverside Church Archives, New York; Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Achieving Personal Integrity," National Vespers sermon, November 23, 1941. Typescript in Riverside Church Archives, New York.

Fosdick's intention for *On Being a Real Person*, as the title so clearly indicates, was, quite simply, to help his readers lead happier, more productive, and more fulfilling lives. Regarding religion, he wrote, "I have tried not to be a special pleader. My main purpose in writing this book has not been to present an argument for religious faith."[49] At times, he even seemed shockingly dismissive of the traditional language of faith, noting, "there is an understandable reason . . . why in modern psychological parlance the word 'integration' has taken the place of the religious word 'salvation.'"[50] Fosdick here did not intend to undermine hope in life after death; he himself had penned a devotional book called *The Assurance of Immortality* back in 1913, and his views on this matter remained unchanged. Rather, he wished to demonstrate the essential unity of purpose between psychological pursuits and the spiritual. Though claiming that in writing he sought "to confront religion only when . . . I ran headlong into it," nevertheless, he continued, "one does run headlong into it."[51] This, he made clear, was because as science explored more deeply into the workings of mind, consciousness, and personality, and religion began to incorporate the advances of modern science, religion and the healing arts were regaining the unity they once held at the dawn of human civilization. The wisdom of the ages, Fosdick maintained, and the science of the moment were coming to speak with one voice.

And so, when Fosdick did write of faith in *On Being a Real Person*, he wrote of its instrumental utility. The words "energy" and "power," so often employed by mystics like Rufus Jones and New Thought writers like Emmet Fox and Glenn Clark, likewise occur

[49] Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, xii.
[50] Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, 34.
[51] Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, xii-xiii.

throughout Fosdick's work. In a chapter entitled "The Principle of Released Power," Fosdick developed a connection between psychological integrity and spiritual life that affirmed the centrality of mystical experience. "That our spirits are continuous with a larger spiritual life," he wrote, in a passage clearly indebted to his mentor in these matters, Rufus Jones, "that in this realm also, as everywhere else, our power is not self-produced but assimilated, is the affirmation of all profound religious experience." Indeed, he continued, "In powerful personality on its deeper levels man's spirit does not seem like a self-contained, landlocked pool, but like a bay, open to the tides. In hours of receptivity man's reserves can be renewed."[52] Because of the power authentic religious experience makes available, according to Fosdick, "faith has a therapeutic value beyond computation" and religion "has brought to those who genuinely have known it a transforming access of power."[53] Frequently, this "therapeutic" and "transforming" power would find expression in a life-altering conversion experience, which Fosdick recognized in the traditional "coming to Christ" of evangelicalism and in its newer forms, such as the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.[54] "Conversion," he argued, "can now no longer be thought of as an ecclesiastical specialty. It is a profound human necessity, and far beyond the range of organized religion it is continually occurring as an

[52] Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, 213.
[53] Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, 131, 233.
[54] Fosdick was an early and active supporter of AA, speaking often at AA events, writing reviews and essays for AA publications, using Riverside Church funds to support AA meetings, and maintaining some correspondence with AA founder "Bill W." Among other things, the AA founders and Fosdick each shared a deep indebtedness to William James's notions of the psychology of conversion. See Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 281-282.

indispensable prelude to the achievement of a healthy personality."[55] Richard Fox, Gary Dorrien, and other scholars rightly consider Fosdick an evangelical as well as a liberal because of his continuing emphasis on transformation through encounters with a living Christ, and Fosdick's evangelical sensibilities pervade even this highly psychologized text.[56]

Fosdick himself had personal experience with the intimate relationship between conversion and healthy personality, and used his experience to write his deeply compassionate and humane chapter on "Mastering Depression." Each of Fosdick's parents had suffered mental illness, and Fosdick's most profound early religious experiences coincided with the breakdowns of his parents. His first conversion, at age seven, occurred when his mother suffered a depression, and a second "awakening," in 1896 at age nineteen, began as his father lay stricken. His spiritual resolve was soon put to the test when he, too, after a trying year of early ministry in New York City, fell into a suicidal despair. Not a crisis of faith, according to Robert Moats Miller, his biographer, this depression instead actually reinvigorated Fosdick spiritually; in religious faith Fosdick found the resources to lead him out. "[I]n his hour of need God came to him redemptively, and the experience was as profound as his conversion at age seven," Miller writes. "This mystical element in his nature later led him into close fellowship with the

[55] Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, 232.

[56] See Richard Wightman Fox, "The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism, 1987-1925," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1993): 639-660. Dorrien's remarks on Fosdick as a liberal evangelical came at the Liberal Theologies Consultation session at the American Academy of Religion national meeting in Philadelphia, PA, November 20, 2005.

Quaker mystic, Rufus Jones. . . . The authority of personal experience was for Fosdick forever to be the primary authority."[57] With these formative years, Fosdick not only developed a keen interest in the workings of the mind, but a hard-won empathy for those who suffered. "Find a task that dignifies [your] days," he counseled his readers, and, no matter your state, whether naturally content or melancholic, "never despise your temperament."[58] Perhaps this was the same wisdom he shared with the young man threatening suicide in his office years earlier, a young man who must certainly have reminded him of himself.

"Revealed Psychology" for Modern America: Liebman's *Peace of Mind* (1946)

Liebman's *Peace of Mind* arose from many of the same autobiographical sources as had Fosdick's book; Liebman, too, based his research on his own emotional needs and the needs of his congregation. *Peace of Mind*, then, like *On Being is Real Person*, was first and foremost a pastoral book, and though Liebman was not prone to despair or crisis in the same way the young Fosdick was, he nonetheless recognized a need for personal transformation in order to serve effectively as a spiritual guide to his flock. For Liebman, the path to spiritual maturity passed not through the gate of evangelical conversion, but through an extended period of intense Freudian psychoanalysis. Liebman, in fact, "was probably the first American preacher of national standing to undergo psychoanalysis," a process he began in the late 1930s while serving the congregation at K.A.M. Temple in

[57] Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 48, 37.
[58] Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, 207, 190.

Chicago.[59] Liebman's own struggle for personal integrity and maturity shaped the contours of his literary ministry to come. With *Peace of Mind*, Liebman used the conventions of middlebrow print culture to offer a war-weary 1940s America spiritual guidance based on Jewish wisdom, Freudian psychology, and a reinterpretation of American pragmatic and Transcendentalist spiritual traditions. In making the fruits of his own struggles accessible to all, Liebman made a lasting contribution to the Judeo-Christian spirituality newly emerging in the years after World War II.

Just what led Liebman into psychotherapy remains unclear. His parents divorced in 1909, when he was two years old, leaving him in the care of his paternal grandparents. A child prodigy, Liebman as a teenager was reported to quote verbatim from memory extended passages of Plato in Hebrew. He enrolled at the University of Cincinnati at the age of fifteen, and raced through seminary and doctoral work in Jerusalem and at Hebrew Union in Cincinnati. In 1931 he returned to the United States, and soon thereafter began to serve his first synagogue, in Lafayette, Indiana. He also married his first cousin, Fan Loth, who had been his student in Cincinnati. The couple married in Kentucky, since such a union was illegal in Ohio; Liebman's skeptical father forced him to produce textual support for the marriage from the Talmud before assenting to the marriage. He began his psychoanalysis around the age of thirty in Chicago with Dr. Roy Grinker, and continued treatment with Dr. Erich Lindemann after moving to Boston in 1939 to serve as rabbi to Temple Israel. These two analysts specialized in the treatment

[59] Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul*, 204.

of stress and grief, indicating, perhaps, that Liebman's analysis helped him cope with the early separation from his parents and his furious professional drive.[60]

Liebman's inner life in these years remains a matter for speculation. What is certain is that he emerged from his three years of psychoanalysis just as the nation was embarking on its own wartime encounter with psychology, perfectly positioning the young rabbi to apply his newfound insights to his various ministries. Though never overly confessional in his sermons or writings, Liebman nevertheless developed through his years in the pulpit a masterly skill in applying the lessons of his own psychoanalytic journey to the lived experiences of his flock. Liebman was in constant demand on the lecture circuit across New England, and, like Fosdick, he broadcast many of his addresses in hugely successful radio appearances; by the mid-1940s he commanded audiences of between one and two million, 70 to 80 percent of whom were Christians.[61] In all of these sermons and addresses, even as the war consumed the nation's attention, Liebman never strayed from his intense devotion to individual spiritual and psychological health. In a sermon called "The Road to Inner Serenity Today," for example, delivered in April 1943, Liebman acknowledged "impersonal, economic factors at work and tremendous political frictions," yet, true to his psychological orientation, he averred, "but unless you're a mystic like the perverted followers of Hegel. . . you must agree that a diseased society begins at home, in sick human beings." As prime evidence, he cited the sickest of

[60] Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul*, 204. Other biographical details come from newspaper obituaries, especially from the Boston *Sunday Advertiser* and *Evening American*, located in the Joshua Loth Liebman Collection in The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.
[61] Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul*, 205.

all human beings; "you cannot tell me," claimed Liebman, "that Hitler is not corroded and eaten away by inner self-contempt."[62] In this sermon, and many others delivered during the war, Liebman presaged the themes of *Peace of Mind*. He eventually took his pastoral and homiletic skills and applied them directly to the war effort, serving as a member of the Committee on Army and Navy Religious Activities, a post that afforded him the chance to oversee the work of Jewish chaplains.

Liebman's oratorical gifts and prescient application of psychological methods to matters of the spirit proved a winning formula in postwar America, yet he certainly benefited, too, from a bit of good old-fashioned luck. He was fortunate to begin his engagement with psychology in the years just before the nation as a whole encountered psychological thinking on a mass scale, and even more, to work personally with the leading authorities on the most pressing psychological issues of the day—those arising from the war itself. Indeed, *Peace of Mind* arose directly from "his frustrations as a pulpit rabbi" at Temple Israel, where he experienced an early and deep immersion in the matters of greatest concern to a nation of readers grappling with the myriad traumas of war, especially stress, guilt, and grief. [63] Liebman's first analyst in Chicago, Dr. Roy Grinker—who was the head of psychiatry at Michael Reese Hospital and an analysand of Freud in Vienna in the 1930s—went on to become the nation's leading psychoanalytic expert in dealing with combat stress. Dr. Grinker, after working with Liebman in the late

[62] Joshua Loth Liebman, "The Road to Inner Serenity Today." Sermon delivered Friday, April 4, 1943. Typescript in the Joshua Loth Liebman Collection in The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.
[63] Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul*, 205.

1930s, served with the U.S. Army in North Africa, where he developed pioneering treatments for the psychiatric wounds of war. Grinker commented while still in theater that "we have learned a great deal that is applicable to peace time psychiatry" and eventually authored the leading manual on the subject, the acclaimed and widely read *War Neuroses*.[64] Liebman's second analyst, the Boston psychiatrist Erich Lindemann, performed innovative research in the psychology of grief, studying the survivors of a nightclub fire in 1942 in which hundreds died.[65] Liebman gratefully acknowledged the critical influence of these preeminent analysts in shaping his thinking in *Peace of Mind*. His own experience as an active preacher and pastor, his tenure training Army chaplains, and his own two analysts and psychoanalytic mentors, Dr. Grinker and Dr. Lindemann, specialists in combat stress and grief, prepared Liebman well to write with deep insight into the religious and psychological needs of a war-wounded nation.

The wartime setting of *Peace of Mind* pervades the text. In fact, the first two sentences of the book, in an introductory "Word to the Reader," directly address the social climate that Liebman knew would mark its reception. "It may seem strange," he began, "for a man to write a book about peace of mind in this age of fierce turmoil and harrowing doubts. It may seem doubly strange for a rabbi, a representative of a people that has known so little peace, to engage in such an enterprise."[66] Yet now more than

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[64] Nathan G. Hale, Jr., *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917-1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 191. See Roy Grinker and John Spiegel, *War Neuroses* (Philadelphia: The Blakiston Company, 1945). *War Neuroses* was first published in 1943 in a restricted edition for military medical personnel.
[65] Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul*, 204.
[66] Joshua Loth Liebman, *Peace of Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), xi.

ever the nation needed the keys to inner peace. Though Liebman usually mentioned the war only indirectly—the terms "Second World War," "Auschwitz," "Hitler," or "Hiroshima" never appear in the text, for example—he nevertheless made clear that his goal of providing Americans with the intellectual tools to aid them in achieving spiritual maturity was now more important than ever in its wake. He wrote of the war most explicitly, not surprisingly, in the sections of the book that deal with death, at one point poetically acknowledging the "fathers, mothers, and young wives who remember the songs of youths whose lives were brief in duration" and "the singers of these songs, young aviators and sailors and brave young soldiers at their posts of freedom. . . ."[67] Elsewhere in the book he acknowledged the challenge that immense suffering often poses to faith, citing, in particular, a war widow who came to him doubting God's love. Liebman, the pastor, looked at the needs of his flock, and saw these needs, in 1946, arising most acutely from the hardships of war. Though more background than foreground in the actual text of *Peace of Mind*, the war nevertheless informs nearly every aspect of the book, and Liebman's work clearly represented a direct response to wartime fears, hopes, and anxieties.

As attuned as Liebman was to the human cost of political and social turmoil, however, he saw his primary task in *Peace of Mind* as ministering to individuals rather than reforming society. Liebman freely recognized, as a good liberal, that "a more just social order will cure vast numbers of people of their present inner conflicts and maladjustments" and so, he continued, "we must battle for a decent and just economic

[67] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 143.

social order as the matrix of personal sanity and balance."[68] Yet Liebman maintained throughout that a "healthier society must be built by healthier human beings," and to this task—saving the world one sick soul at a time—he devoted his ministry. In an address given to the Woman's City Club in Boston in May 1946, just as *Peace of Mind* was rocketing up the bestseller charts, Liebman most clearly articulated his goal in writing the book. Not everyone, Liebman knew, could indulge in years of expensive and time-consuming psychotherapy, and so "I wrote 'Peace of Mind,'" he told his audience, "to provide a kind of group-answer for many troubled minds and to show how this new science [psychoanalysis] and prophetic religion can become wonderful partners in a joint program of human health and happiness."[69] Liebman, though writing three years after *On Being a Real Person* and deeply sympathetic with Fosdick's work, here saw an unmet need. "Many religious books only conspire to make [the average person] feel more guilty and more sinful," he wrote in *Peace of Mind*, "while many psychological books, although trying to reassure him, merely add to his inner confusion. . . ."[70] Liebman knew he could do better. Psychoanalytic insights, which Liebman tellingly referred to as "revealed psychology" and "the sharpest tools that God has given men for the examination of the human mind," formed the perfect complement to prophetic religion, and together could

[68] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, xii.
[69] Joshua Loth Liebman, "Reconstructing the Individual for a New Society," address delivered before the Woman's City Club in Boston, May 14, 1946. Typescript in the Joshua Loth Liebman Collection in The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.
[70] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, xiii.

provide "real help to perplexed moderns."[71] "Fused together by terrible necessity," he intoned, "religion and psychology now bend forward, as one, to succor stumbling humanity, to lift it up, anoint its wounds, and fill its cup to overflowing with the oil of peace."[72]

The wounds Liebman sought to anoint may have been fresh for his postwar readers, yet they represented the most ancient foes of humanity: fear, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, grief, doubt, and death. In a series of impressively learned and sensitive chapters, Liebman showed his readers how the tools of liberal religion and modern science could together defeat these timeless enemies. His chapter on grief, "Grief's Slow Wisdom," like Fosdick's on depression, soon became the book's centerpiece; in the extensive newspaper and magazine advertising campaign promoting the book, images often showed it open to the first page of the grief chapter. In this chapter Liebman exhibited his most skillful integration of the religious and the psychological. He began with an affirmation of the great value of religious rituals solemnizing death, noting how "religion attempts its most heroic feat in the presence of the grave" by simultaneously affirming "the tragic fragility of our brief day on earth and . . . the value of the day despite its fragility."[73] In this regard, Liebman acknowledged, "there is little essential distinction between what the writers of twenty centuries ago said on this ultimate problem and what the writers say about it today."[74] Yet, he asserted, even after twenty centuries and more

[71] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 14, xiii.
[72] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 15.
[73] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 106.
[74] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 107.

of human pondering, most people still did not have a clear understanding of the right approaches to grief—and now more than ever they must. "Answers to these questions are increasingly indispensable today since the war inevitably has brought tragic news to countless homes," Liebman observed. "If men and women do not know how to face bereavement and adjust to it, no truly good life will be possible for this generation."[75]

Here Liebman turned to his own analyst, Dr. Lindemann of Harvard, one of the nation's foremost psychological investigators of grief. Lindemann advocated, based on his research, a courageous acceptance and expression of sadness, a determined readjustment to new life patterns without the loved one, and ultimately the formation of new relationships to meet continuing social needs. This work must be done, Liebman warned, without hope for any "short cut to readjustment" and without "expectation of miraculous healing."[76] The painful, unavoidable process of grieving, hard for the healthy-minded and often nearly impossible for the more fragile or immature, was well understood by the mid-1940s thanks to modern psychology, Liebman thought, yet modern Americans still too often failed to experience grief in healthy ways. "The discoveries of psychiatry," he proclaimed, "remind us that the ancient teachers of Judaism often had an intuitive wisdom about human nature and its needs which our more sophisticated and liberal age has forgotten."[77] The Jewish practice of *shiva*, for example, with its careful ordering of time precisely for the expression of grief, had much to teach "liberal rabbis and liberal ministers alike," who "are continually committing

[75] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 108-109.
[76] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 117, 116.
[77] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 122.

psychological fallacies" in their desire to prevent awkward expressions of emotion. Such fear of basic human feeling revealed, thought Liebman, "the whole superficiality of modern civilization. . . ."[78]

In many instances throughout *Peace of Mind*, in fact, as in his chapter on grief, Liebman's advice took decidedly countercultural forms, as he used the discoveries of psychoanalysis to counter the prevailing assumptions of American liberalism. Liebman's profound embrace of modern science marked him quite clearly as a religious liberal, and indeed *Peace of Mind* is replete with glowing passages about "the religion of the future" and other such tell-tale phrases. Yet Liebman, as a Freudian and a Jew, also shared a deep skepticism about Western post-Enlightenment liberalism, especially the unblinking faith in rationalism he saw as the fatal flaw in Western culture.[79] Such critiques resonated profoundly only a year after Hiroshima and the liberation of Auschwitz. "Modern liberal religion has shared the mood of the last several centuries—the mood of rationalism," he noted. "Liberals saw how many traditional faiths wallowed in the oceans of feeling, and allowed superstition and myth to govern men's destinies. Revolting against this undisciplined emotionalism, they went to the other extreme and built chilly meetinghouses upon the cold pillars of abstract reason."[80] With regard to matters of conscience and guilt, for example, Liebman counseled a mature recognition that evil

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[78] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 124.

[79] Liebman, for example, often quoted with approval the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose own rejection of scientific positivism led him first to Henri Bergson and later, after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, to the writings St. Thomas Aquinas.

[80] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 195.

instincts are a part of human nature, and that repression only leads to unhealthy eruptions later in life. He advised accepting the good and the evil in oneself, and sublimating the energy of unwanted drives toward higher purposes, proclaiming, "sublimation is the profoundest spiritualizing force in man's life."[81] Historian of psychology Nathan G. Hale, Jr. notes that most Americans at mid-century—those who paid any attention to Freudianism, anyway—downplayed Freud's emphasis on the darker side of human nature. But Liebman and many of his fellow Jewish psychologists, as a people well acquainted with the consequences of human depravity, were not so quick to dismiss Freud's gloomier propositions.[82] As Liebman put it: "Man became half human while worshiping at the shrine of pure reason; the result was that the emotions were captured by perverts and tyrants. The dictators of our age, recognizing that human beings become moral and spirituals invalids on a diet of abstract science, invaded the sphere of the emotions with their death dances and blood symbols."[83]

According to Liebman, therefore, psychology and religion together must temper the excesses of Western liberalism and teach humans again how to care for their emotions and spirits. On the very basic matter of fear, for example, Liebman stoutly observed that "man has to pay the price of fear and worry in order to be human"—a price worth paying since "fear is often the stimulus to growth, the goad to invention."[84] The key to

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[81] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 28.
[82] Andrew Heinze, "Jews and American Popular Psychology: Reconsidering the Protestant Paradigm of Popular Thought," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (December 2001): 950-978.
[83] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 196.
[84] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 82.

handling the myriad sufferings of the human condition, Liebman thought, was to accept them as part of our limited humanity, yet also to face them unflinchingly so that they do not unhealthily consume one's entire existence. In the same way, Liebman observed that many are reluctant to face fears because they "are sometimes like old friends; we are afraid to give them up because they have a certain psychological premium value," and yet he warned his readers of repressed fears leading to depression, rage, and aggression. Psychological insight can be invaluable in many instances, Liebman noted, in confronting fear, and he advised readers to take advantage of the many resources for therapy springing up across the nation, including new counseling centers in churches and synagogues. Ultimately, though, for the most fundamental kind of fear, metaphysical fear, the fear of meaninglessness and oblivion—in these cases only faith can provide succor. "Judaism and Christianity," Liebman counseled, "can teach us what we need to know—that we are rooted in the Divine and that we need not fear our destiny either here or in any world yet to come."[85] Liebman's direct acknowledgment of the evil side of human nature—an acknowledgement rooted in his Jewish identity as much as in his Freudianism—may have run against the American grain, but his ultimate admonishment to trust in God surely did not.

Indeed, for all its sharp criticisms of American culture, this book succeeded in large part because of Liebman's sensitivity to prevailing norms in American culture. Mostly obviously with regard to commercial success, *Peace of Mind* provided the kind of spiritual uplift and intellectual enrichment Americans had come to expect from religious

[85] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 103.

middlebrow books. Like Fosdick and Rufus Jones, Liebman clearly understood his role as an intellectual tour guide, introducing his readers to the great thinkers of the day and those from the past who had shaped his own psycho-spiritual development. Liebman devoted numerous sermons and radio addresses to topics of intellectual and literary interest, speaking on WBZA radio about "My Three Favorite Books of the Year" and devoting sermons to the thought of Freud, Madame Curie, and John Dewey. In his sermon on his favorite books of 1945, Liebman opened with a paean to the uplifting potential of reading: "The written page is the key by which we enter into many mansions—mansions of thought, of fantasy, of feeling. . . . It is the pen of the poet, of the novelist, the thinker that pushes back the confining walls of our daily routine—pushes them back until the room of our life becomes large and spacious, populated with interesting characters, challenging ideas, exotic scenes. Literature is the best interior decorator of all. . . ."[86] He brought this same sensibility to *Peace of Mind* with obvious success. A bookseller from Nashville, Tennessee, wrote to Liebman's publisher, Dick Simon of Simon and Schuster, expressing pride in the literary and intellectual merit of Liebman's work. "In nearly 25 years of bookselling I have at last encountered an 'inspirational' book that I am able to read," she wrote. "[T]he flood of trash devoured under that name by the American public has always astounded and slightly disgusted me,

[86] Joshua Loth Liebman, "My Three Favorite Books of the Year." Sermon delivered January 20, 1946. Typescript in the Joshua Loth Liebman Collection in The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.

although I have not been adverse to selling it. . . . This time your best seller will be a matter of pride—no need for a single inward blush. . . ."[87]

This bookseller felt no need to blush because Liebman offered in *Peace of Mind* not just psychological and religious counsel, but encounters with Robert Frost and Thomas Mann, T.S. Eliot and Dante, John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, Lewis Mumford, and Bertrand Russell. *Peace of Mind*, in other words, provided just what a successful work of middlebrow nonfiction should, something to edify and ennoble rather than simply amuse. Central to Liebman's work, right alongside the psychoanalysts and prophets, were those American giants who also reflected on matters of psyche and soul, Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James. Indeed, for all the countercultural ambition of Liebman's critique of liberal rationalism and optimism, *Peace of Mind* nevertheless exhibits a deep debt to the American tradition of pragmatic and transcendental spirituality, a foundational component of American liberalism. Leigh Eric Schmidt argues that the liberal spirituality embodied by Emerson and James constituted a central and abiding tradition in American religious life through the twentieth century, and Liebman, though a Jew, stood solidly within that tradition.[88] *Peace of Mind*, rich with literary references and scientific expertise, in this way also served as a primer in American pragmatic theology. In *Peace of Mind* Liebman harnessed the force of middlebrow readerly expectations to offer

[87] Elise Stokes to Dick Simon, February 15, 1946. From the Joshua Loth Liebman Collection in The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.
[88] Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

a reinterpretation of American pragmatic theology for a psychologically savvy 1940s audience, now more than ever eager for interfaith answers to common human struggles.

Liebman's debt to American pragmatism was evident well before *Peace of Mind* appeared. In a March 1943 sermon broadcast from Temple Israel on WNAC, Liebman told his listeners "How to Be Normal in Abnormal Times." He counseled friendships and commitments to goals larger than oneself, but also, critically, recognized the need for the thorough self-knowledge that comes through psychological scrutiny. Here he turned to an American, however, rather than the Viennese muse:

> One immortal personality is that of William James, who was born just a hundred years ago and who lived to become one of the most fascinating and influential American thinkers. . . . [H]e taught himself to rise from sick-mindedness to healthy-mindedness. . . . This courageous liberal who suffered so profoundly himself and conquered his dark and wayward spirit can help us to take as the motto of our lives those words from the prophet Ezekiel, which he loved to quote, 'Son of man, stand upon thy feet and I will speak unto thee.' He is certainly one of my good companions.[89]

Donald Meyer maintains that Liebman's theological reflections stood "in the neighborhood of William James," but like so many other twentieth-century writers of liberal religious texts, Liebman's debt to James ran deeper.[90] *Peace of Mind* employs throughout James's language of healthy-mindedness, at one point remarking, "all men today need the healthy-mindedness of Judaism."[91] And though Liebman did distrust overly mystical ideas about the subconscious, he nevertheless did not shy away from

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[89] Joshua Loth Liebman, "How to Be Normal in Abnormal Times." Sermon delivered Friday, March 7, 1943. Typescript in the Joshua Loth Liebman Collection in The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.
[90] Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers*, 328.
[91] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 143.

invoking Emerson, the greatest American mystic, citing with great admiration the Seer of Concord's admonition to "give all to love . . . nothing refuse."[92]

In ways even more profound than these occasional quotes from James and Emerson suggest, Liebman's *Peace of Mind* exhibits a Jamesian and Emersonian ethos, including a pragmatic theology rooted in an expansive sense of American possibilities. This uniquely American kind of exceptionalism, first captured in John Winthrop's image of a "city upon a hill," perfectly matched both the nineteenth-century cultural nationalism of figures like Emerson and Whitman and the greatly expanded scope of American power upon the world stage in the years after World War II. "I believe that the time is coming," Liebman rhapsodized, when "the age-old fears of want and poverty, illness and uselessness, will be conquered by the collective conscience of democratic society."[93] Though Freud and the Hebrew scriptures did indeed lead Liebman to acknowledge the inherent evil in humanity, here Liebman aligns more clearly with American pragmatism; as Cornel West notes, "Emerson and James simply . . . cannot imagine wholesale regression owing to human will and action," and Liebman, even in the wake of Auschwitz, could not either.[94] Psychically and spiritually healthy Americans, Liebman contended, armed now with knowledge from the latest science and the wisdom of the ages, would not only transform their own society, but indeed the whole of humanity. The toll of war was staggering, so that "[i]n many countries death has become

[92] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 69.
[93] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 102.
[94] Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 57.

so ugly and human life so unbearable that it may prove impossible for multitudes there to retain psychic balance and sanity." So America must rise to its destiny: "All the more reason, then," he declared, "for the millions of Americans living far distant from the scenes of carnage to make the achievement of moral resoluteness and courage in the presence of death a kind of ethical obligation—a determination to keep ourselves sane as the guarantors of the human future."[95] Americans must find peace of mind not just for themselves, in other words, but more critically as a kind of psychic and spiritual Marshall Plan for a war-torn world.

On this foundation of postwar optimism and American exceptionalism Liebman constructed a theological vision he grandiosely called "A New God Idea for America." Here his debt to James and Emerson—indeed, his debt to the many pioneers of American transcendental and mystical spirituality—is most profoundly evident.[96] America's new standing in the world required a new idea of God; as Emerson had done in his day, Liebman called this new generation of Americans to cast off the God of its parents and grandparents, and to reconcile with the divine anew. "Now, a religion that will emphasize man's nothingness and God's omnipotence; that calls upon us to deny our own powers and glorify His—that religion may have fitted the needs of many Europeans," he declared, "but it will not satisfy the growing self-confident character of America."[97] Rather, he continued, now fully channeling Emerson, "We must be brave enough to declare that every culture must create its own God idea rather than rely on

[95] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 141.
[96] Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 286.
[97] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 173.

outworn tradition." [98] And so, writing to an audience flush with victory, Liebman saw in the power of American democracy a chance not only for a new world order, but for a new divine order as well: "There is a chance here in America for the creation of a new idea of God; a God reflected in the brave creations of self-reliant social pioneers; a religion based not upon surrender to submission, but on a new birth of confidence in life and in the God of life."[99]

In the years since *Peace of Mind* first appeared, scholars have often dismissed it as yet another example of banal mind-cure philosophy, a claim tenable only to those who have read no more of it than the title.[100] Andrew Heinze forcefully rebuts this line of shallow criticism, emphasizing the surprisingly strident Jewish polemic that runs just beneath the surface of the text. Yet layered together with Liebman's vigorous advocacy for the wisdom and healthfulness of Jewish traditions is an equally vigorous reinterpretation of the spiritual tradition of American liberalism. At times the two strands run seamlessly together, and Liebman in fact goes so far as to find in a Jamesian God and an Emersonian democracy the very telos of Judaism itself. "God, according to Judaism, always wanted His children to become His creative partners," Liebman wrote, "but it is only in this age, when democracy has at least a chance of triumphing around the globe, that we human beings can grow truly aware of His eternal yearning for our

[98] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 174.
[99] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 173.
[100] The first and most influential of such critics was Will Herberg in *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), though Herberg actually mentions Liebman's work in a footnote only. For a recent example of this common misreading of Liebman, see Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America since 1945: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 16-18.

collaboration."[101] As a hugely successful writer in religious middlebrow culture, Liebman surely understood the challenge of offering expert wisdom to a deeply democratic readership. In invoking a pragmatic theology of partnership with God, then, Liebman offered a liberal theology at once educating and uplifting for his audience. He challenged his readers with the latest scientific understanding of the human person while simultaneously empowering them to remake themselves, their society, and even their understanding of God. And as *Peace of Mind* soon demonstrated with its phenomenal commercial success—among Protestants and Catholics as well as Jews—Americans in the early postwar years were open to a spiritual engagement with another tradition of faith. Liebman's moral stature as a Jew in postwar America, and his thoughtful presentation of a richly psychological spirituality, allowed him both to critique and embrace American liberalism, and to comfort his readers with peace of mind while simultaneously challenging them with the hard tasks of remaking themselves and their world.

Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948): An Autobiography of Reading and Seeking

Thomas Merton's coming-of-age autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, first published in October 1948, is a very different book from Fosdick's and Liebman's inspirational bestsellers. Beyond the obvious and critical difference of genre, Merton's account of his youthful angst and eventual conversion revealed a deep alienation from Western modernity, whereas Fosdick and Liebman, though not without their criticisms,

[101] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 174.

were fundamentally modern and affirming of American life. Their deep embrace of psychology as a key aid to realizing spiritual maturity also rang utterly hollow to Merton, who had once been enamored of Freud and Adler and Jung as a student at Cambridge, but finally rejected them completely. "Day after day I read Freud," Merton, the monk, recounted of his student days, "thinking myself to be very enlightened and scientific when, as a matter of fact, I was about as scientific as an old woman secretly poring over books about occultism, trying to tell her own fortune. . . ." This "psychoanalytical fortune-telling," he noted, "was to provide me with a kind of philosophy of life and even a sort of pseudo-religion," yet ultimately it was "nearly the end of me altogether."[102] Other Catholic writers of the period, most notably Bishop Fulton Sheen in his bestselling *Peace of Soul* (1949), shared Merton's disdain for modern psychology, especially psychoanalysis. And yet, from the moment *The Seven Storey Mountain* first appeared, it was linked by critics and the popular press with the other religious bestsellers of the decade, especially the works of Fosdick and Liebman, as evidence of the spiritual hunger prevalent in the wake of the war. Furthermore, in spite of the many significant differences among these texts, Merton's work, like Fosdick's and Liebman's, participated in the same religious middlebrow culture—which profoundly shaped its marketing and reception. And like those earlier works, Merton's autobiography was devoured by anxious Americans seeking resources for coping with the psychic and spiritual dislocations of the era.

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[102] Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1998 [1948]), 137, 113. Merton's title refers to the mountain of purgatory in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Many Americans in the middle and late 1940s, in fact, marveled at the resurgent popularity of inspirational books, and at how this popularity crossed boundaries of tradition and genre. A newspaper reporter for a Boston paper asked both a prominent psychiatrist and a well-known preacher in 1949 to comment on the simultaneous mass appeal of Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Lloyd Douglas's novel *The Big Fisherman*, and Liebman's *Peace of Mind*. The psychiatrist, Gregory Zilboorg, stated flatly that the reason was simply a coincidence with no larger meaning—a number of good books just happened to appear at once. The preacher, however, himself a highly accomplished writer of religious middlebrow books, dug deeper. "There are two reasons," he replied. "First, a time of crisis raises the serious question about the meaning of life. People ask, what is your philosophy? People want a philosophy to put a meaning into the life ahead of them. Second, a time of crisis is a time of strain when people need an internal source of spiritual power that will give them what Liebman calls 'Peace of Mind.'"[103] To find meaning, to construct a philosophy, to nurture inner sources of spiritual power: for these reasons readers turned to Merton and to Douglas just as to Liebman. The preacher who understood this knew this audience well; he was none other than Harry Emerson Fosdick.

Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, like Liebman's and Fosdick's bestsellers, became such a fantastic commercial success because it offered coherence and hope, a trenchant critique of American shortcomings and a personal story that was deeply American all the same. Though written from the often highly critical perspective of his new self—Father Louis, Trappist monk—Merton's story retains an overarching

[103] "Religious Books Currently Bestsellers—But Why?" *Boston Traveler*, March 22, 1949.

hopefulness, evident in the lyrical accounts of the joy he ultimately found in Catholic spiritual discipline. That it came from the pen of a Catholic—a monk nonetheless—and one offering a powerful critique, not just of American culture in general, but of American Protestantism in particular, reveals all the more the powerful appeal of Merton's mystical spirituality. For decades American liberal Protestant readers, through bestsellers and book week and book club offerings, had been told that mystical experience offered a bridge beyond sect or creed to the essence of the religious life. Now a Roman Catholic offered a joyful and liberating vision of the mystical life, and in the wake of war, with its horrors and sorrows and calls for unity, American readers, Protestants and Catholics, embraced it as they had the work of no Catholic writer before.

Fosdick, in his brief comments on *Peace of Mind* and *The Seven Storey Mountain*, understood the critical role the war had played in shaping spirituality, and indeed these three books all fundamentally reflect the wartime historical moment. Even more, these three bestsellers shared a common audience and that audience's deep commitment to real-world utility; each was written to improve, in concrete ways, the lives of its readers, and readers understood this. Twenty-first century critics, so carefully attuned to questions of genre and discipline, may miss these critical similarities, but the readers of the 1940s, immersed in the cultural habits of middlebrow reading, did not. These three books all operated in the religious middlebrow culture of the 1940s. They were promoted by the same book clubs and book weeks, were advertised and marketed and blurbed with the same intensity, and were sold alongside each other as guides to spiritual fulfillment and personal happiness.

Each book not only participated in this literary culture as a commodity, but also was a product of it. Fosdick and Liebman peppered their works with allusions and quotes that signaled their erudition. Much more fundamentally, however, Merton's autobiography revealed a life transformed by reading. His journey to devout Roman Catholic monasticism was a path very few of his readers would follow. But Merton's account bore witness to a mystical awareness sparked and fueled by deep engagement with authors living and dead. Indeed, the remarkable power and commercial success of Merton's anti-capitalist, frequently anti-American and anti-Protestant, world-renouncing, moralistic, long, dense, and highly literary account of a man's decision to become a monk resided precisely in his ability to evoke, with great poignancy and urgency, the despair and perseverance and ultimate triumph of a reader seeking spiritual fulfillment. The story of Merton, for all its potentially alienating differences, was the story of his own readers, striving for meaning and wholeness through their own encounters with books; by reading this account, they too could participate both in his remarkable journey and in its dramatic resolution.

Merton's narrative deftly combines a deep dissatisfaction with American life, especially the emptiness of consumerism and popular culture, with a quintessentially American tale of the self-made man. He decried, at the very outset, "the spooky little prejudices that devour people who know nothing but automobiles and movies and what's in the ice-box and what's in the papers"—surely a rather pointed barb for his postwar audience, enjoying material abundance for the first time in two decades—and then recounted, in the first third of the book, his youthful fascination with precisely these

things. Popular culture especially, throughout the autobiography, functions as a menacing seductive force. "My grandparents," he wrote, "were like most other Americans. They were Protestants, but you could never find out precisely what kind of Protestants they were." This was of no great consequence, however, because "the movies were really the family religion. . . ."[104] When the family lived in New York briefly in the 1920s, Merton's father, Owen, even played the piano at a small local movie theater, a role that Merton seemed to think nicely complemented his other musical outlet, as the organist at a nearby Episcopal Church. Even years later, in college, the movies remained "a kind of hell" for Merton and his friends, who "were hypnotized by those yellow flickering lights. . . ." "[T]he suffering of having to sit and look at such colossal stupidities," he added, rather moralistically, "became so acute that we sometimes actually got physically sick."[105] Whether true or an instance of autobiographical embellishment, the notion of physical revulsion toward the movies clearly captured Merton's adult alienation from American cultural life.

Merton's youthful interests in literature and music faced the same condemnation from the adult Merton as his passion for the movies. Merton wrote of a childhood trip through Switzerland and France, noting, "by the time we reached Avignon, I had developed such a disgust for sightseeing that I would not leave the room to go and see the Palace of the Popes," which he later thought "probably the only really interesting thing we had struck in the whole miserable journey." Instead, the young Merton "remained in

[104] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 27, 24.
[105] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 165.

the room and read *Tarzan of the Apes*. . . ."[106] Later still, in prep school at Oakham in England, Merton discovered jazz and the novels of Hemingway, Joyce, and D.H. Lawrence, but "I only discovered much later on," he wrote, that aesthetic and moral modernism "were fused inseparably in a single order of taste."[107] Reading choices, for Merton, were moral choices, as reading had the power to shape one's mind and soul. Like nineteenth-century evangelicals and twentieth-century book-club pioneers, Merton believed deeply in the power of reading, and therefore in the moral imperative of right reading. Lacking the literary guidance available to his own readers—many of whom encountered *The Seven Storey Mountain* through one of the three book clubs that carried it—Merton, as a young man, read aimlessly and hedonistically, and therefore lived, he thought, aimlessly and hedonistically.[108]

Merton's assessment of modern life, like his assessment of literary modernism, was not simply a critique of the mindlessness of popular culture, but of a much deeper and darker emptiness at the core of Western society. Merton portrayed European and American culture between the wars as fundamentally corrupt, and no one, he made clear, shared in that corruption more completely than he. Merton described his years at Oakham, and then in college in the middle and late 1930s at Cambridge University in England and Columbia University in New York, as years of thoroughgoing immersion in modern intellectual, aesthetic, and moral currents, and therefore as spiritually deadening. These were the years of Freud and Adler and Jung, of Joyce and Lawrence, and of Marx.

[106] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 53.
[107] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 88.
[108] Robert Giroux, "Introduction," to Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, xvi.

(Merton was briefly taken with communist teachings while at Columbia.) Merton's narrative account of these years reveals the great inner turmoil he felt at the time, and the conflicting pressures that shaped the retelling. His retelling turned not only on the vicissitudes of memory and emotion, but also on the didactic and evangelistic impulses that propelled him to write, and the demands of his order, which exercised complete editorial control over the autobiography and which censored the most scandalous aspects of his previous life.

And Merton's early years did, indeed, contain scandal, scandal that for Merton ultimately became a source of deep guilt and shame. In addition to the drunken poetry jags and nights in smoky jazz clubs and flirtations with radical politics typical of an interwar bohemian, biographers have uncovered another facet of Merton's early life that, because of concerns from his Trappist superiors, he only obliquely referred to in *The Seven Storey Mountain*—while at Cambridge in the spring of 1934, when he was nineteen years old, one of the women he was seeing became pregnant.[109] That summer he left for New York. After receiving news of a poor showing on his exams, and in the wake of a hushed financial settlement with the young woman and her family, Merton decided to remain in New York and continue his education at Columbia, where he enrolled in January 1935. He never met his child, and never had contact with the woman again.

In describing these years, Merton the monk marshaled the full power of his newfound theological outlook to issue jeremiads against the social order, but even more to reflect on the grip of sin in his own life. Fosdick and Liebman were, in many ways,

[109] Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 84.

traditional moralists—Fosdick shared the adult Merton's disdain for popular culture, especially the movies, and Liebman shared his dark view of human nature, if not of the remedy for that darkness—but neither of these liberals articulated anything approaching the robust theology of corporate and individual sin that Merton related in his narrative. Just as neo-orthodox theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, and popular evangelists such as Billy Graham, were reviving the doctrine of original sin in Protestant circles as an antidote to liberalism's perceived inadequacies, Merton likewise preached to his postwar audience about the pervasiveness of evil. The autobiography, in fact, begins, in its very first lines, with a meditation on war, human nature, and sin:

> On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war . . . I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers.[110]

Merton returns to this theme of human depravity again and again. One of the great strengths of the book is Merton's ability to capture his inner states at various points in his past. During his schooling in England, his years of movies and D.H. Lawrence and drinking and sex, Merton proclaimed, his "soul was simply dead. It was a blank, a nothingness. It was empty, it was a kind of spiritual vacuum. . . . The worst thing that ever happened to me was this consummation of my sins in abominable coldness and indifference. . . ."[111] Sin, for Merton, separation from God, always remained a central category of understanding, of ordering and making sense both of his own life and world

[110] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 3.
[111] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 3.

affairs. In August 1939, with Europe on the brink of war, Merton thought, "I myself am responsible for this. My sins have done this. Hitler is not the only one who has started this war."[112] Merton saw himself as both creature and creator of a deeply fallen world, an outlook that gave the autobiography its occasionally heavy-handed sermonizing, but also its searing honesty and poignancy.

Merton ultimately found his liberation from sin in a spiritual conversion, first a conversion to the teachings and practices of Roman Catholicism, and soon thereafter to the contemplative life of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, the Trappists. For all the foreignness of Merton's tale, his European past and monastic Catholic future, Merton's path to this spiritual liberation, to the life of retreat he called "the four walls of my new freedom," was typically American.[113] Merton got saved by reading. Indeed, despite the frequent, and often apt, comparisons critics made between Merton's autobiography and St. Augustine's *Confessions*, the central storyline of Merton's work is neither his focus on his own personal sinfulness nor the corruptions of Western culture, but on the power of reading—of earnest, anxious, probing reading—to lead one astray, perhaps, but also to point one back to the true path. At every critical juncture along his journey, at each phase of his protracted and agonizing conversion, Merton read. From a childhood spent in study hall "with the others who did not go to Mass . . . reading the novels of Jules Verne or Rudyard Kipling" to the eventual discovery of romantic poetry,

[112] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 272.
[113] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 410.

Eastern mystical literature, and Catholic philosophy, Merton just kept reading, until he read himself into conversion.[114]

His appetite for books and his habits of reading were formed early. Merton's father had been a painter, his mother an intellectually demanding Quaker who trained her son to use reading as a means of self-improvement. His mother, Merton recalled, encountered the idea of progressive education in "one of those magazines," and "answered an advertisement that carried an oval portrait of some bearded scholar with pince-nez" from a company that offered books and school supplies. "The idea," Merton explained of this 1920s reading program, "was that the smart child was to be turned loose amid this apparatus, and allowed to develop spontaneously into a midget university before reaching the age of ten."[115] Merton the monk, steeped in the Catholic intellectual tradition, clearly valued the structure provided by church hierarchy and tradition, even approving of the *imprimatur*, though he recognized that it "is something that drives some people almost out of their minds with indignation."[116] But the adolescent and young man of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was not the monk of later years; the young Merton lived and read in a way remarkably in line with the idea of becoming a "midget university"—in the same way, in fact, if perhaps a bit more intensely, as countless other Americans seeking meaning and wholeness through the marketplace of books.

The first critical encounter on Merton's path of reading was with the early nineteenth-century English prophetic and mystical poet William Blake, who, like Merton,

[114] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 58.
[115] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 11.
[116] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 187.

was both a writer and a visual artist. "I think my love for William Blake had something in it of God's grace," Merton declared. "It is a love that has never died, and which has entered very deeply into the development of my life."[117] Merton was only sixteen when he discovered Blake, and later felt compelled to reassure his audience, and his superiors, that in extolling Blake, he was not "recommending the study of William Blake to all minds as a perfect way to faith and to God" because, he readily admitted, "of all the almost infinite possibilities of error that underlie his weird and violent images."[118] Yet Merton nevertheless affirmed that Blake's "rebellion, for all its strange heterodoxies, was fundamentally the rebellion of the saints." Blake gave voice to Merton's sense of alienation from the modern world, both his unmet inner longings and his deepening disgust with Western culture. Blake's longing for God, like the young Merton's, "was so intense and irresistible that it condemned, with all its might, all the hypocrisy and petty sensuality and skepticism and materialism which cold and trivial minds set up as unpassable barriers between God and the souls of men." Merton continued to live, for many years to come, this life of "petty sensuality and skepticism and materialism," yet, he could later confidently declare, "[t]he Providence of God was eventually to use Blake to awaken something of faith and love in my soul. . . ."[119] Merton eventually wrote his master's thesis at Columbia on Blake, and, in the course of those studies, he wrote, "[a]s Blake worked himself into my system, I became more and more conscious of the necessity of a vital faith, and the total unreality of the dead, selfish rationalism which had been

[117] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 94.
[118] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 96, 97.
[119] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 96, 97.

freezing my mind and will. . . ." Blake, for all his heterodoxy and eccentricity and abstruse mysticism, was the perfect spiritual guide for the restless, and similarly poetic and mystical, Merton. Once in the monastery, having found refuge in the dogma of the Church, Merton finally concluded, "I no longer need him. He has done his work for me: and he did it very thoroughly," but he still, even as a monk, refused to abandon his love for Blake, declaring, "I hope that I will see him in heaven."[120]

The Seven Storey Mountain expresses, in many passages, a vigorous, even zealous, defense of Roman Catholic theology and ecclesiology, presented by an exuberant convert to pre-Vatican II teachings and practices. Nevertheless, the Merton represented in this text still clearly prefigures the later Merton so famous for his dialogues with Buddhist contemplatives. Merton here, like the later Merton, was a restless seeker, a spiritual adventurer, and Blake was just the beginning. Soon thereafter came Dante—"the one great benefit I got out of Cambridge was this acquaintance with the lucid and powerful genius of the greatest Catholic poet," Merton wrote—and Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, a chance find in the window of Scribner's bookstore in New York. Gilson, a professor at the Sorbonne in Paris and a leading neo-Thomist historian and philosopher, was a serious scholar, and his works were promoted in religious middlebrow circles for their clarity of expression, recommended at times by the Religious Book Club, the Religious Book Week of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and the Religious Books Round Table of the American Library Association. Though horrified at this stage in life to discover the *imprimatur* of the Church printed inside Gilson's work,

[120] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 208, 207.

Merton read anyway, and "got out of its pages something that was to revolutionize my whole life"—a new concept of God, "which showed me at once that the belief of Catholics was by no means the vague and rather superstitious hangover from an unscientific age."[121] Gilson's book, which Merton noted was one of the few he brought with him to the monastery, led to "a desire to go to church," but this desire soon faded, and Merton's quest continued for years afterwards solely in the realm of books.[122] Indeed, after Dante and Gilson, Merton turned not to further Catholic writers, but to the mystical traditions of the East.

An Englishman, Aldous Huxley, first turned Merton toward the East, and an Indian, a man named Swami Bramachari, eventually steered him back, to the Catholic mystical writers. Merton first read Huxley's *Ends and Means* in November 1937 at the suggestion of his friend Bob Lax. As a teenager Merton had liked Huxley's fiction, and he was surprised to hear from Lax that Huxley now "was preaching mysticism," and that his mysticism, "far from being a mixture of dreams and magic and charlatanism, was very real and very serious." Just as Merton the monk felt compelled to apologize for the eclecticism and eccentricity of Blake, so too with Huxley he quickly averred that *Ends and Means* "was full, no doubt, of strange doctrines by reason of its very eclecticism"—the same kind of reservations expressed by the liberal Protestants who recommended this book as a December 1937 Religious Book Club selection.[123] But precisely this eclecticism, the fact that Huxley "had read widely and deeply and intelligently in all kinds

[121] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 189.
[122] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 192.
[123] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 203.

of Christian and Oriental mystical literature," gave the book its potency for the liberal Protestants seekers of the 1930s, and for Merton the seeker as well. From Huxley Merton learned about prayer and asceticism, that negation might "be freeing, a vindication of our real selves," and ultimately and most powerfully, "of a supernatural, spiritual order, and the possibility of real, experimental contact with God." After reading Huxley, Merton ransacked the university library for books on Eastern mysticism, eventually reading "translations of hundreds of strange Oriental texts."[124]

While reading the mystical texts from the East, Merton befriended an actual Eastern mystic, a Hindu guru called Swami Bramachari who had come as a missionary to the United States, had earned a PhD at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and was living with some of Merton's friends in New York. "We got along very well together," Merton wrote of Bramachari, "especially since he sensed that I was trying to feel my way into a settled religious conviction, and into some kind of a life that was centered, as his was, on God."[125] Bramachari shared Merton's growing revolt against "the noise and violence of American city life and all the obvious lunacies like radio-programs and billboard advertising" but never railed directly against these things or preached directly to Merton of his beliefs. Rather, what impressed Merton was the guru's life of disciplined contemplative prayer and rigorous asceticism. *Ends and Means* had turned Merton to the Eastern mystics with the conviction that "Christianity was a less pure religion," but Bramachari, aware of Merton's inner turmoil and fascination with

[124] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 204, 205.
[125] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 214.

contemplative practices, finally told Merton pointedly, "There are many beautiful mystical books written by Christians. You should read St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and *The Imitation of Christ*."[126] Before long, as Merton recounted, he "added, as Bramachari had suggested, *The Imitation of Christ* to my books, and it was from there that I was eventually to be driven out by an almost physical push, to go and look for a priest."[127]

Merton's path to conversion, and from conversion to baptism, first Mass, sense of vocation for the priesthood, and ultimately call to monastic life, unfolded with many further fits and starts. Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, a book, like those of Etienne Gilson and Aldous Huxley, heavily promoted by the book clubs and book weeks, proved critical as well, introducing Merton to the beauty and rigor of medieval scholastic thought. After his first Mass his "reading became more and more Catholic," including a period of great interest in the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins, and after each meeting with a priest to discuss his conversion he would leave armed with even more books to read.[128] Merton, especially in these intense and spiritually fraught months before his entry into the monastery, was the near-perfect embodiment of the spiritual striving through reading that characterized the religious middlebrow culture of the day. Fosdick and Liebman had each revealed the fruits of their reading—reading born of personal struggle as well—in their own inspirational bestsellers. Merton likewise, through his autobiography, sought to educate and inspire his readers with his own story of a life transformed by reading.

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[126] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 216.
[127] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 220.
[128] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 231.

Merton eventually decided to follow the path of mystical asceticism himself because of a final realization prompted by his reading. The insight, in his words, was that "the conversion of the intellect is not enough." "Because of the profound and complete conversion of my intellect, I thought I was entirely converted," he confessed of the time just before choosing to enter the priesthood. "Because I believed in God, and in the teachings of the Church, and was prepared to sit up all night arguing about them with all comers," he declared, "I imagined that I was even a zealous Christian."[129] Rather, Merton finally came to see that he needed to mold his will, and not just his mind, to the will of God, and he determined that a life of monastic contemplation, disciplined by the rituals of the Church and nourished by its sacraments, would allow him the intimate rapport with the divine, and the liberation from the burdens of his sinful self, that he so ardently sought. He entered Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky in December 1941.

Merton's story—an immigrant's story, a seeker's story, a reader's story—was fundamentally a very American story, a story of re-birth as a new man in the new world. His sharp critique of both Western civilization and human nature resonated with readers dispirited by the horrors of the war, and bewildered at the material and cultural transformations of its aftermath. At Gethsemani, Merton freed himself from the consumer striving and middle-class diversions that to many epitomized American life, but that to him provided no peace. "I had managed to get myself free from all the habits and luxuries that people in the world think they need for their comfort and amusement," he wrote about his arrival in the monastery. "My mouth was at last clean of the yellow,

[129] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 253.

parching salt of nicotine, and I had rinsed my eyes of the grey slop of movies so that now my taste and my vision were clean."[130] Merton had arrived, had found peace of mind and peace with God, and *The Seven Storey Mountain* did indeed spark for many readers a desire to likewise renounce the trappings of American life and seek union with God. But Merton's tale resonated more for the journey than the destination. Merton certainly relished the certainty the church provided, but his continuing appeal for readers was that certainty for him did not mean the end of seeking. In later years he became one of the most influential figures in the dialogue between Zen Buddhist and Christian contemplatives that bore such fruit in the 1950s and 1960s, serving as an eloquent interpreter especially of the writings of D. T. Suzuki for American readers.[131] Merton died in 1968 in Thailand, having traveled to Asia to meet with the Dalai Lama and study Buddhist contemplative practices.

READING THE READERS OF FOSDICK, LIEBMAN, AND MERTON

The 1940s bestsellers of Fosdick, Liebman, and Merton emerged at a critical juncture in the history of religious reading, and therefore middle-class spirituality, in the twentieth-century. Appearing after more than two decades of intensive marketing campaigns designed to encourage and shape religious reading habits, these books reflected the pervasiveness of religious middlebrow practices both in their own commercial success and in the representations of reading and seeking that constituted

[130] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 333.
[131] Most influential of Merton's many writings on Zen was *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

central themes of the books themselves. The war, of course, most particularly shaped the cultural moment in which these books arrived and to which they responded, and the war simultaneously furthered the already strong culture of religious middlebrow reading and pointed that reading in significant new directions. In this way, in addition to serving as capstones to longstanding trends in religious middlebrow culture, the mid-1940s books of Fosdick, Liebman, and Merton also serve as harbingers of further changes to come. For the first time, in the years after the war, ordinary Americans looking for spiritual enlightenment in mass-market books turned, not reluctantly but eagerly, to authors from other traditions of faith. In order to understand the significance of the postwar moment as a turning point in both religious print culture and spirituality, we must attend to those who read these bestsellers, to their reasons for reading, and to the kinds of meaning they sought, and found, in these texts.

Although the readership of these bestsellers was wide, it was nevertheless structured in significant ways by the social realities of American life, especially by race, class, and gender. The parameters of race and class are difficult to pin down, though no available evidence indicates a wide readership for these texts outside of white, middle-class communities. The venues in which they were marketed and sold may very well have limited the awareness, availability, and appeal of these books largely to the white middle class. The ways in which gender defined the reception of these texts, however, is more ambiguous, and possibly more significant. Attitudes about reading—especially religious reading—and notions of character and personality in American culture, from the nineteenth though the mid-twentieth centuries, each carried powerful gendered

valences. Women were the presumed audience for much of the literature of evangelical piety in the nineteenth century, a notion the liberal Protestant promoters of religious reading in the 1920s sought to overcome with their marketing blitzes that associated modern faith with masculinity. Nevertheless, historian Richard Fox observes that the "twentieth-century cultivation of personality," so critical to the formation and reception of each of these texts, "may finally have given women—generally excluded from the nineteenth-century quest for character—a means of pursuing a characterlike standard of social excellence."[132] The social democracy of the print culture marketplace, though bounded by race and class, and the spiritual turn toward the psychological and mystical, may have ultimately proven liberating for women, so often excluded from the structures of power in institutional religion.

Overall, circumstantial evidence indicates that more women than men read these books, though not overwhelmingly more. Most of the letters in the Liebman archive, for example, are from women, and while this hardly represents a scientific survey, it does provide one clue into the gender composition of his readership. Andrew Heinze likewise speculates that Liebman's book reached a largely female audience, in part because, rather than preach a turn to inner power for material gain (like Napoleon Hill or Norman Vincent Peale), "It spoke to a more 'feminine' interest in the psyche for its own sake."[133] Heinze also notes that the book's thoughtful and sensitive treatment of the subject of grief undoubtedly appealed to the women whose sons and fathers, husbands and lovers, had

[132] Fox, "The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism," 647.
[133] Andrew R. Heinze, "*Peace of Mind* (1946): Judaism and the Therapeutic Polemic of Postwar America," *Religion and American Culture* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 40.

been lost in the war. Tellingly, both the *Look* article and the *Reader's Digest* condensation of *Peace of Mind* chose to focus on Liebman's discussion of grief. The feature stories on Liebman in women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Ladies Home Journal* further attest to the likelihood of a predominately female readership.

The journalists and editors covering Liebman may have seen grieving as the emotional work of women in the year after the war's conclusion, but three years earlier, still in the midst of war, Fosdick's book entered a more ambiguously gendered cultural context. The Council on Books in Wartime chose *On Being a Real Person* for an Armed Services Edition. Thousands of copies were mailed to servicemen throughout the fall of 1943, straining limited resources, and Fosdick's book was among those special editions selected for distribution to the men waiting to cross the English Channel into France on D-Day.[134] Demand, both military and civilian, remained so high that Fosdick's publisher, Eugene Exman of Harper & Brothers, wrote repeatedly to the War Production Board to request increases in the book's paper allotment. Additional paper was warranted, Exman claimed, because the book "is speaking to the spiritual, mental, and morale needs of the American people. . . ."[135] In a later letter, Exman further pleaded: "We respectfully request additional paper so that we may not be forced to curtail sales of Dr. Fosdick's book which is doing so much to add spiritual strength to people's lives

[134] *On Being a Real Person* was issued as part of series D, and Eisenhower's staff ordered eight thousand sets of series C and D books set aside for the D-Day force. These books were distributed in late May 1944. John Alden Jamieson, *Editions for the Armed Services, Inc.: A History* (New York: Editions for the Armed Services, Inc., 1948), 26-27.

[135] Eugene Exman to Harry West, July 30, 1943. Harper & Brothers Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

today."[136] The War Production Board denied the request, and despite Harper's efforts at printing the book on lighter stock, ultimately the paper rationing necessitated a reduced production. Some reviewers of Fosdick's book understood these wartime pressures, and associated its call for "real personhood" with the wartime struggle against Nazism; these reviewers, therefore, gave the book a masculine spin. The review in the Champaign, Illinois, *News-Gazette,* for example, which appeared on Easter Sunday 1943, a day "when we pause to evaluate our religious—even our patriotic—faith," argued that "High on your reading list, if you would become a real person, a real American, [should be] Fosdick's 'On Being a Real Person.'"[137]

Men in the service were among the throngs who deluged Fosdick with correspondence. One soldier wrote Fosdick in 1949: "On Being a Real Person was the set of ideas about religion and God that made sense to my somewhat skeptical mind. It was the key inspiration . . . the foundation that began a complete reorientation of my value system . . . and my life. . . . I carried it for 22 months in the Pacific Theater of Operations. I'm certain that I've read it 15 times through while I was in the army."[138] Another wrote of reading the book in an internment camp in the Philippines.[139] A third, Capt. William Graber, wrote directly from the Pacific in November 1944: "After 1500

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[136] Eugene Exman to Harry West, August 4, 1943. Harper & Brothers Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.
[137] C. C. Burford, untitled review, *Champaign News-Gazette*, April 25, 1943.
[138] Frederick Gorman to Harry Emerson Fosdick, April 29, 1949. Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers. First two ellipses in the original. Used by courtesy of the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.
[139] Benjamin Berry to Harry Emerson Fosdick, April 26, 1945. Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers. Used by courtesy of the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

miles in the air our C-47 dropped in on Henderson Field, Guadalcanal. While having a quick cup of coffee at the Red Cross hut there on a reading table was a copy of On Being a Real Person. 'Stolen sweets are sweetest.' That's what I did. Now for the first time in ages a crime was committed and I'm not sorry. After that for another 1500 miles at an altitude of over 10,000 feet your book was greatly enjoyed."[140]

Yet this appeal to patriotic machismo does not by any means tell the whole story of Fosdick's readership. Women, too, served in the Second World War, and many encountered Fosdick's book in the military as well. A private, Janet Royce, from the Second Signal Company stationed in Virginia, wrote Fosdick, "the book is making the rounds of the barracks and in our next all night session it will probably be torn to pieces and chewed back and forth between us."[141] Many more readers, of course, encountered *On Being* as civilians than as military personnel, and it seems that, as with Liebman, the majority of Fosdick's stateside readers were women on the homefront, who almost certainly turned to Fosdick's book for the same reasons they would read Liebman's a few years later. Fosdick, as noted, had been a pioneer in the field of pastoral counseling, and in the introduction to *On Being*, he wrote of his book's intended audience: "I have pictured its readers in terms of the many, diverse individuals who have come to me for

[140] Capt. William Graber to Harry Emerson Fosdick, November 28, 1944. Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers. Used by courtesy of the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.
[141] Pvt. Janet Royce to Harry Emerson Fosdick, n.d. Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers. Used by courtesy of the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

help."[142] The Fosdick archive contains records of many hundreds of such counseling sessions, and from this evidence it seems the majority were white, middle-class women.

The marketing of the book provides further clues about its readership. It was excerpted in women's magazines such as *Yours*, and advertised in venues likely to attract the notice of middle-class women. Marshall Field's, the large downtown Chicago department store, for example, took out a full-page advertisement in the *Chicago Tribune* to promote its sale of *On Being a Real Person*. "Out of his 20 years' experience as a personal counselor," the text of the ad ran, "Dr. Fosdick now writes to all those who need inner security in these trying times. Out of all he has learned . . . he has chosen the most important things to set down for you."[143] Alongside shoes for the kids and a tie for the husband, the ad seems to imply, come and get inner security for *you*. The likelihood of a female majority in both Fosdick's and Liebman's readership takes on added significance when one considers the central role that women, and feminism, played in the spiritual transformations that were to come. At a time when men dominated the leadership of church and synagogue, religious middlebrow reading—both the medium and the message—freed women to construct their own worlds of meaning from the raw materials provided by mass-market books.

At least as important as *who* read Fosdick's and Liebman's books are the questions of *why* readers turned to these books and *how* they read them. Each of these books was marketed heavily through the book clubs and book weeks that constituted the central

[142] Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, ix.
[143] *Chicago Tribune,* March 12, 1943.

organizational apparatus of religious middlebrow culture, and this provides the first set of clues. Fosdick, a long-term member of the editorial committee of the Religious Book Club, saw many of his titles appear as book club recommendations over the years, and *On Being a Real Person*, too, made the cut as an alternate selection in March 1943. "A graceful and persuasive style of writing," the committee noted of this book from one of its own, "will give the book a wide appeal to many who are not reached by ordinary preaching."[144] In addition to this designation, and the book's selection for publication in an Armed Services Edition, *On Being a Real Person* was also a featured title in the National Conference of Christians and Jews's 1944 Religious Book Week campaign, recommended for its "expert guidance concerning the psychological and spiritual processes by which a well-organized life is achieved."[145]

The war, of course, shaped just what this culture of middlebrow reading actually looked like in the daily practices of Fosdick's audience. A reviewer of Fosdick's book connected the wartime strains to reading habits: "The terrible pressures of the times are such that great numbers of people who have not manifested any interest in religion previously are now turning to spiritual sources for help in the time of their trouble," he wrote. The anonymous reviewer commented further on the potentially wider impact of commodified religion. "But turning to religion does not mean, necessarily, a turning to Church," he continued. "Indeed, hundreds of thousands of people are reading religious

[144] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, March 1943.
[145] "Protestant Book List," Religious Book Week pamphlet, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1944, 16.

books who will never darken the door of any house of worship."[146] Again, though, the servicemen and women who wrote to Fosdick offer direct testimony, testimony that gives witness to a middlebrow hunger for spiritual self-improvement. In addition to the soldier who read *On Being* fifteen times, and the private in the signal company who commented that her buddies would tear the book to pieces in an "all-night session," another Fosdick writer, a veteran recovering in a Miami hospital, wrote on Red Cross stationery, "[I am] now days deep in your book. The main fault with you is that it is too full of wisdom. I have read each chapter twice and then I am afraid I am missing something. Often I wonder why I hadn't thought of it before. What I like best about it is that it is all down right horse sense!"[147] This re-reading of a book that is both "horse sense" and "too full of wisdom" perfectly describes a reader hoping to glean life lessons from a book that bridges the high and the low.

Rabbi Liebman's bestseller, like Fosdick's, was sold and marketed through the mechanisms of middlebrow culture. The Religious Book Club featured *Peace of Mind* as its main selection for May 1946, lavishly praising this title from "one of the most vigorous younger rabbis in America." Neither bland moralistic preaching nor technical treatise, Liebman's book, the editors proclaimed, "is a joining of hands, as it were, of the sanctuary and the laboratory. In style and manner, moreover, the treatment is so luminous that the reader is enabled to diagnose his own situation and to gain positive

[146] *The Christian Advocate*, April 29, 1943.
[147] Walter Blankenship to Harry Emerson Fosdick, April 10, 1943. Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers. Used by courtesy of the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

clues for dealing with it." The reviewers praised Liebman's discussions of love, fear, grief, and guilt, though they noted the potentially controversial nature of his account of sin. "His point of view," the review stated, in sum, "is always that of the 'once born'—not that of the 'twice born'—to use William James' famous classification."[148] *Peace of Mind* remained on the minds of the Religious Book Club editors in subsequent years. In their review of Swami Akhilananda's *Mental Health and Hindu Psychology*, an August 1952 alternate selection, the editorial committee noted, "What Rabbi Joshua Liebmann [sic] did for Liberal Protestantism, and Fulton Sheen did for Roman Catholicism, this writer has tried to do for Hinduism."[149] Peace *of Mind* also appeared on the roster of Religious Book Week titles chosen for 1948, in a special subsection of the Jewish list, called "Books of Lasting Value," introduced for the final year of the campaign.

The letters to Rabbi Liebman confirm the habits of religious middlebrow reading suggested by such marketing. The middle-aged high school teacher who wrote Liebman of her love for a student noted elsewhere in her letter, "I have read all of your book twice, and some parts of it several times. I found much help in it," but then added, "although some of it is too deep for me to understand."[150] Her relationship to the text—reading and re-reading, probing despite it being "too deep"—sounds much like the veteran in Miami who read and re-read Fosdick's book. "My husband works 18 hrs a day," wrote another woman, named Lillian, after reading *Peace of Mind*. With only four years of

[148] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, May 1946.
[149] *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, August 1952.
[150] Edith Fischman to Joshua Loth Liebman, June 23, 1947. From the Joshua Loth Liebman Collection in The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.

education, married at age twenty, now a housewife and mother, she confided to Rabbi Liebman: "Therefore, I am a very lonely woman, and since I have 2 children and have to do my own babysitting, I have resorted to reading. Dear Rabbi, words just couldn't express what reading has done for me. It has given me insight into the world around me." Contrary to stereotype, she then adds, "Of late it seems fiction doesn't seem to interest me. I can benefit from non-fiction so much more."[151] The word choices here, "resort to reading" and "benefit from non-fiction," testify to the potency of the religious middlebrow endeavor. Not reading for pleasure or escape, those motivations that Trysh Travis, Janice Radway, and other historians of reading tell us were so often considered the feminine manifestations of middlebrow uplift, this woman turns to Liebman's guidance for hard-earned and deeply needed spiritual and intellectual betterment.

Lillian's plight as a "lonely woman" trapped with small children perfectly mirrors the "Problem That Has No Name" so famously described by Betty Friedan more than a decade later in *The Feminine Mystique*. Though Lillian was less well educated than Friedan's Smith College classmates, many of the other readers of postwar religious bestsellers were very likely college-educated women seeking to understand how to cope with the stifling demands of wartime, and later Cold War, family life. As the nation shifted from fighting fascism to fighting communism, Congress passed the National Mental Health Act, which established in 1946 the National Institutes of Mental Health in recognition of the need for a psychologically healthy population to win the long struggle

[151] Lillian to Joshua Loth Liebman, March 15, 1948. From the Joshua Loth Liebman Collection in The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.

to come. In this battle, the family itself was on the front lines, as "the home came to be viewed as a bulwark against Communism."[152] Popular movies such as *The Snake Pit* (1948), the increasingly therapeutic-minded women's magazines, and even socially conservative authors such as Marynia Farnham all acknowledged the strains of Cold War family life on American women.[153]

Though Friedan's assessment of postwar gender relations has become a commonplace, in the 1940s and 1950s, as Elaine Tyler May notes, "critical observers of middle-class life considered homemakers to be emancipated and men to be oppressed."[154] Women such as those who wrote to Liebman and Fosdick were hard pressed to find public advocates, especially among religious writers. By the mid-1950s, a few women's voices, such as Anne Morrow Lindbergh's and Catherine Marshall's, were heard.[155] In a more elite cultural vein, Georgia Harkness published commercially successful books on prayer in the late 1940s.[156] Yet, in spite of these few women writers, men dominated public religion—institutional leadership, broadcast media, and print—in 1940s and 1950s

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[152] Eva S. Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 169.

[153] A point made by Moskowitz, in *In Therapy We Trust*, 165. See Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham, M.D., *The Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947). As Lundberg and Franham wrote: "women are the pivot around which much of the unhappiness of our day revolves, like a captive planet. To a significant extent they are responsible for it. . . . [W]omen as a whole (with exceptions) are maladjusted, much more so than men. For men have appropriate means to social adjustment: economic and political power, scientific power and athletic prowess" (24).

[154] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 20.

[155] See Catherine Marshall, *A Man Called Peter* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1951) and Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Gift from the Sea* (New York: Pantheon, 1955).

[156] See, most notably, Georgia Harkness, *Prayer and the Common Life* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1948).

America as perhaps never before or since, producing a generation of what Martin Marty has called "seething women." Amid this silent suffering, three men, Fosdick, Liebman, and Thomas Merton, spoke directly and powerfully to the nameless problems and spiritual yearnings of these earnestly reading American women.

The Fosdick and Liebman reader letters, ripe with phrases such as "resort to reading" and "benefiting from non-fiction," demonstrate the complex interplay of reading practice and spirituality. More than anything, these readers' accounts indicate the practical utility of reading as a spiritual act, and the felt need for religion itself to solve real-world problems. A member of the Riverside congregation, who had served in the European theater, wrote to Fosdick in August 1945, "I feel that one constructive result of the war will be a realization of the need for 'faith in belief' since we have put religion to work, and found that it worked!"[157] The missionary who wrote of reading *On Being* in an internment camp in the Philippines noted: "But even there I kept insisting that life in a camp is also life and an opportunity. What use would religion be if it could not help us in a situation like that?"[158] These voices echo the lonely housewife and the sexually conflicted schoolteacher who turned to Liebman's *Peace of Mind* for specific help.

Of course, Liebman's and Fosdick's books were how-to guides, and so an instrumental take on spirituality made sense for their readers. The readership of

[157] Lt. Kenneth Booth to Harry Emerson Fosdick, August 31, 1945. Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers, the Burke Library archives at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

[158] Benjamin Berry to Harry Emerson Fosdick, April 26, 1945. Harry Emerson Fosdick Papers. Used by courtesy of the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

Merton's autobiography, therefore, provides an instructive comparison. While Merton's personal example in 1948 was as an apparently world-renouncing cloistered monk, Merton's appeal for his readers was the same as Liebman's and Fosdick's—the book offered a faith of personal and social utility in everyday life. The October 11, 1948 issue of *Time* magazine carried a short article in the "Religion" section with the intriguing title "Mystics Among Us," which profiled Merton, declaring "the world still has millions of mystics, and the most mystical human beings are often among the most practical as well."[159] Bishop Fulton Sheen, in his comments about *The Seven Storey Mountain*, repeated the often-heard comparison of Merton's autobiography to St. Augustine's *Confessions*, but the British novelist Graham Greene, in his dust-jacket blurb, more closely captured the essence of Merton's tale. Greene indicated that Merton's book might inspire readers to follow Rufus Jones's book-reading advice from the 1920s; "*The Seven Storey Mountain,*" declared Greene, "is a book one reads with a pencil so as to make it one's own." One can hardly conjure a better image of the middlebrow reader seeking insight for personal spiritual needs.

Indeed, this long, dense, and demanding book achieved its success precisely because readers embraced it through the practices and expectations of middlebrow reading culture. "From the sedate lending libraries of New England to the bustling women's clubs of the West Coast," reported *Time* magazine in April 1949, "people are reading and talking about Poet Merton's sensitive, unhappy groping through the litter of modern civilization to find peace at last." Merton's account even generated the

[159] Religion Section, *Time*, October 11, 1948, 87-89.

occasional conversion to Catholic monasticism, according to a *Life* magazine feature on the Trappists in America that appeared in response to Merton's book. "Since the last war," *Life* reported, "the Trappist have gained young veterans who turned to them for the peace and quiet they thought they would find at a monastery. There are now 12 veterans of World War II at the Utah monastery alone."[160] The vast majority of readers, of course, did not seek to emulate Merton's path of retreat, but rather strove to learn from his story how to gain some measure of peace in their own very worldly lives.

Evidence from a range of sources indicates that Merton's book was read, in these middlebrow ways, not just by Catholics, but also by many others seeking their own paths to intimacy with God. Promotional material from Harcourt, Brace, the book's publisher, described it as an "autobiography that transcends all creeds"—certainly a sales pitch as much as a statement of fact—but Clifton Fadiman, an author, radio personality, and leading figure in middlebrow culture with no vested interest, declared, "It should hold the attention of Catholic and non-Catholic alike."[161] Reports from booksellers around the country showed that Merton's audience generally reflected regional variation. In heavily Catholic Boston, for example, booksellers estimated that 85 percent of buyers were Catholic, while in Atlanta, at least according to the manager of the book department in Rich's department store, more Protestants and Jews were buying the book than were

[160] *Life*, "Trappist Monastery," May 23, 1949, 88.
[161] Promotional clippings, Box 33. Thomas Merton Papers, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission of the Merton Legacy Trust.

Catholics. "Protestants and Catholics, businessmen and housewives," summed up the report *Time,* "in 26 weeks since its publication, have zoomed the *Mountain's* sales. . . ." [162]

As *The Seven Storey Mountain* zoomed in sales, many of these readers took their pencils and wrote directly to Merton. Merton was so inundated with mail from readers, in fact, that, as he joked to a friend, "I have a secretary who mails out the "Trappist-no-write-letters" card to the fans."[163] (Merton did, of course, maintain a lively correspondence with friends and colleagues.) Sadly, few of these fan letters remain, but Merton revealed much about who they were and how and why they read his book in letters to friends and colleagues. He confided to a friend, Sister Therese Lentfoehr: "Letters come in from everywhere, Park Avenue and San Quentin Prison, the sanctuary and the studio,"[164] but, he wrote elsewhere, "more of them are usually sensible married women who want to find out how you can lead the contemplative life and take care of the children at the same time."[165] This was the practical faith that Fosdick and Liebman had each advocated, and that Merton's readers, the "sensible married women," evidently sought as well.

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[162] Religion Section, *Time*, April 11, 1949, 63.
[163] Thomas Merton to Sister Therese Lentfoehr, February 25, 1950. Thomas Merton Papers, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission of the Merton Legacy Trust.
[164] Thomas Merton to Sister Therese Lentfoehr, December 27, 1948. Thomas Merton Papers, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission of the Merton Legacy Trust.
[165]Thomas Merton to Robert Lax, November 24, 1948. Thomas Merton Papers, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Used by permission of the Merton Legacy Trust.

CONCLUSION: READING AS PROTESTANT, CATHOLIC, JEW

The great upsurge in religious reading during the Second World War came after a quarter century of sustained promotional efforts, culminating in the reading campaigns of the Council on Books in Wartime and the National Conference of Christians and Jews during the war. In the midst of these campaigns, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Thomas Merton, and Joshua Loth Liebman—one Protestant, one Catholic, one Jew—produced widely successful texts, each read by large numbers of readers from other faiths. The particular shape of this upsurge in religious reading, standing at the apex of middlebrow culture, suggests a number of significant trends in American religious life. Most evident is an accelerating ecumenism, described most influentially by Will Herberg in 1955 as an emerging Judeo-Christian "American Way of Life." Herberg feared that the so-called "triple melting pot" was leading to insipid theology and the loss of integrity for each faith tradition. Inasmuch as the letters to all three authors reveal shared, pragmatic concerns for the everyday utility of spirituality, while indicating very little interest in formal theology or creeds, Herberg's fears seem at least partially realized in the response to these texts. Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, Herberg contended, "have all tended to become 'Americanized' under the pervasive influence of the American environment," and for Herberg this meant a loss of theological and liturgical specificity to go along with increased emphases on social ethics and personal happiness.[166]

Yet these books refute at least as much as they confirm Herberg's famous thesis. Liebman and Merton, each in his own way, were fiercely partisan, often criticizing

[166] Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 95.

Protestant religious culture, especially traditional orthodoxies. In his chapter in *Peace of Mind* on conscience, for example, Liebman criticized Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin as unhealthily obsessed with human beings' natural wickedness—and with repression and atonement as responses—rather than advocating a more psychologically sound focus on growth; this was precisely the matter that gave the reviewers from the Religious Book Club, in an otherwise glowing recommendation, the most pause. In numerous instances throughout the book, in fact, such as in his reference to sitting *shiva* in his chapter on grief, Liebman used Jewish practices and teachings as the basis for a healthier approach to life than that offered by American Protestantism.[167] "Liebman thrilled to the idea that Judaism's insights into human nature matched those of dynamic psychology," writes Andrew Heinze. "That idea fueled the Jewish polemic in *Peace of Mind*."[168] Merton, likewise, was not shy in his attacks on the prevailing values of Protestant America, a sharp contrast with many of his Catholic contemporaries who sought to downplay Catholic distinctiveness in an effort to further interfaith dialogue and, in turn, the social standing of Catholic Americans.[169] In a passage on virtue, for example, that echoes Liebman's on conscience, Merton declared that the term's enduring currency in Catholic countries "is a testimony to the fact that it suffered [in the U.S. and Protestant Europe] mostly from the

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[167] Liebman, *Peace of Mind*, 24, 123.
[168] Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul*, 220.
[169] Merton's biographer, Michael Mott, writes rather simply, "His autobiography was neither ecumenical nor restrained." See Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 247. And Robert Inchausti, seemingly in direct response to Herberg, argues, "With one honest book, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton had boldly refuted both the soulless instrumentalism of the postwar technocrats and the insipid religious bromides offered by their positive-thinking preacher cohorts." See Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 141.

mangling it underwent at the hands of Calvinists and Puritans."[170] Rising "good-will" between faiths certainly contributed to the commercial success of *Peace of Mind* and *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but these were not thoroughly ecumenical books. Liebman and Merton shared with Fosdick a deep, modern distrust of conservative Protestant notions of sin, self, and emotional wellbeing. Part of what makes Liebman's and Merton's broad successes remarkable, in particular in an age of ecumenism, was their appeal in spite of the polemical qualities of their books.

Merton and Liebman were able to be successful, in spite of their strong partisan sympathies, because they simultaneously advanced forms of spirituality that, to many Americans, transcended sect. Herberg and other analysts of the period, wedded to sociological binaries of denomination and sect, and theological binaries of orthodox and heterodox, failed to grasp the significance of the psychological and mystical elements gathering strength in American religious culture. In his description of the emerging American consensus, advanced most forcefully by the National Conference of Christians and Jews—that the three great American traditions of faith were "equally diverse, equally American, expression of an over-all American religion"—Herberg could see only decline.[171] "Under the influence of the American environment," he contended, "the historic Jewish and Christian faiths have tended to become secularized in the sense of

[170] Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 223.
[171] Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 101.

becoming integrated as parts within a larger whole defined by the American Way of Life."[172] Secularization, for Herberg, was the inevitable result of Americanization.

American mass culture did indeed bring changes to American religious life, but those changes are not best understood as secularization or decline. Religious middlebrow books introduced millions of Americans to ways of understanding the self that seamlessly blended modern psychology, mysticism, and interfaith religious exploration. The term Judeo-Christian, in fact, according to Mark Silk, began to gain meaningful usage in the 1930s in response to fascist appropriations of the label "Christian," and in the wake of the war it emerged as a part of common parlance because of its ethical and spiritual vitality in addition to its political utility.[173] Rather than an evisceration of faith, what Herberg called "the inner disintegration and enfeeblement of the historic religions," the emerging spirituality fostered by mass-marketed books marked the culmination of decades of liberal religious efforts to craft forms of spirituality adequate to meet the challenges of modern life.[174] These trends only continued in subsequent decades, indicating that what Herberg saw as decline instead constituted a rising force in American religious life.

The increasingly central role of books as commodities in American religious life, and of the mystical and psychological spirituality advanced in so many of those books, created a space in the national spiritual conversation for genuine spiritual exchange among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. "Judeo-Christian," in this way, must not be

[172] Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 95-96.
[173] Mark Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," *American Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 65-85.
[174] Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 104.

understood as simply a formulation of American civil religion, and instead as an instance of larger developments in the transformation of middle-class spirituality in the twentieth century. Liberal religious culture moved first towards greater psychological sophistication, beginning in the 1920s and accelerating after the war, then broadened even further in the second half of the century, toward ever-greater openness to other traditions of faith. Fosdick's *On Being a Real Person*, Liebman's *Peace of Mind*, and Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*—and the flourishing, expanding, religious middlebrow culture these texts represented—were critical to these developments.

Just before Christmas in 1952, President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower famously remarked, "Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply religious faith, and I don't care what it is. With us of course it is the Judeo-Christian concept but it must be a religion that all men are created equal."[175] Scholars refer to this quote more frequently than any other when characterizing postwar "Judeo-Christianity" as a vapid expression of American nationalism in religious idiom. Will Herberg, only three years later, pointed to Eisenhower's now famous quip as evidence of the spiritual decline he so passionately lamented.[176] But looking only at the rhetoric of politicians or the screeds of academic critics misses the lived spirituality of Judeo-Christianity, as seen in the works of Fosdick, Liebman, Merton, and in the lives of their readers.

[175] Quoted in Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," 65.
[176] Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew,* 97.

Conclusion

The Second World War marked a critical turning point in American religious history, as it did in so many other facets of American life. Foremost among the changes brought about by the war was an emerging openness, from certain segments of the Protestant majority in particular, toward other traditions of faith, not simply as collaborators in social, economic, or civic activities, but as partners in a mutual endeavor of religious understanding. The unique exigencies of this war—the ideology of the nation's fascist foes, the horrors of Nazi crimes against the Jews of Europe, and the total mobilization of the American people—created a powerful surge toward national spiritual unity. Books were enlisted as never before in this wartime campaign, and religious books in particular assumed patriotic as well as spiritual dimensions. As political leaders declared "books as weapons in the war of ideas," an interfaith organization, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, became the central broker of religious reading, coordinating the massive, nationwide Religious Book Week campaign that ran from 1943 to 1948. After the war, books that were distinctively Jewish and Catholic, such as Liebman's *Peace of Mind* and Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, found receptive audiences from Americans of many religious backgrounds. In the years and decades to come, these wartime trends—accommodation to the civic reality of pluralism, and the dawning realization that inter-religious dialogue could aid the search for spiritual enlightenment—emerged as some of the most significant religious and cultural developments in the history of the country.

These developments of the 1940s, however, did not arise *ex nihlio.* The two decades of striving toward a national spiritual center that preceded the war laid the foundation for the spirituality of the postwar period. In the decades after World War I, liberal Protestant leaders, executives of the American publishing industry, librarians, booksellers, critics, and other powerful cultural figures collaborated to promote the buying and reading of religious books in the United States. Aware of the psychic and spiritual dislocations wrought by mass culture, increasing consumerism, and the profusion of new scientific and theological knowledge, these cultural leaders sought to guide American moderns through such confusing times by offering their expertise in the field of religious reading. The various reading campaigns they crafted—Religious Book Week in the 1920s, the Religious Book Club, founded in 1927, and the Religious Books Round Table of the American Library Association, also a product of the 1920s—formed the basis of a thriving religious middlebrow culture.

The clergy, seminary professors, publishers, librarians, booksellers, and critics who became the arbiters of this middlebrow culture sought to define a national spiritual center that would hold together a fragmenting society, create new markets for books, and maintain their privileged status in American religious discourse. In this last endeavor they were not successful. The new commercial publishing departments, such as the one Eugene Exman ran at Harper & Brothers, capitalized on the emerging culture of religious reading to promote religious books, with increasing success, as commodities in a free marketplace. The mediation of middlebrow culture freed these new commercially oriented religious publishers from the responsibilities of cultural stewardship that had

regulated the engagement of previous generations of publishers with the market. The centrifugal forces of the marketplace, and the ethical imperatives of liberal Protestantism itself, ultimately undermined the cultural sway the Protestant elite once exercised. What emerged in the place of this waning establishment was a religious culture more strongly than ever dependent on the marketplace, especially the marketplace for books, and an enhanced emphasis on mystical and psychological spiritual forms. The structures, practices, habits, and content of middlebrow reading culture, built over two decades, made possible the changes of the World War II period. The reading program of the National Conference of Christians and Jews leveraged the mystical and psychological spirituality that had been promoted so heavily in the 1920s and 1930s to encourage and facilitate interfaith exchange as an important component of modern American spirituality. These long-term trends, with roots stretching back decades before the war, continued to play out for decades after the war, indeed for the remainder of the century.

All along the way, of course, critics labored to resist the tides of change. Billy Graham, at age thirty-one, launched his astonishingly successful career as an evangelist in 1949 with an eight-week crusade in Los Angeles that marked the resurgence of evangelicalism in American public life. His first book, *Peace with God* (1953), was a rejoinder to Liebman's *Peace of Mind*, and the evangelicalism Graham typified (with greater dignity than many others) continued its ascent into the 1960s and 1970s, when it fully reemerged as a powerful force in national political life and public discourse. Even from within the loftiest realms of liberal Protestantism, loud voices continued to denounce the trends emerging from within religious middlebrow culture. The *Christian Century*, the

leading journal of ecumenical liberal Protestantism, published as a cover story in 1951 an essay with the foreboding title "Pluralism—National Menace," by which the writers specifically meant the newly assertive public presence of Roman Catholicism. Echoing Paul Blanshard's *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (1949), the editors of the *Christian Century* decried the malevolent influence of "[p]riests educated in Rome," especially the Catholic desire to operate parochial schools and thus not participate in the patriotic indoctrination of the public schools. "As a result of this . . . propaganda among Roman Catholics," observed this editorial, "the United States is faced with the menace of a plural society based on religious differences." A plural society, the *Christian Century* further warned, when stripped of the religious basis for its cohesion, "becomes particularly vulnerable to communist propaganda."[1]

Similarly, a few years later, Paul Hutchinson, the editor of the *Century*, wrote a scathing attack in *Life* magazine on the "cult of reassurance," by which he meant positive-thinking and psychological spirituality in various guises, as a new religion undermining traditional Protestant Christianity. Hutchinson followed Russell Lynes's division of Americans into lowbrow, middlebrow, and highbrow, and found that middlebrow Americans had turned in horrifyingly large numbers to preachers such as Norman Vincent Peale, whose *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) had recently become the

[1] "Pluralism—National Menace," *Christian Century*, June 13, 1951, 702. On the history of pluralism in the twentieth-century United States, see Charles H. Lippy, *Pluralism Comes of Age: American Religious Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000); and William R. Hutchinson, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

bestselling religious book of the century, surpassing Liebman's *Peace of Mind*.[2] "One reason why this cult makes such an appeal," Hutchinson wrote, "is that our middle-brows live in awe of the 'scientist'—especially the psychological scientist," a development Hutchinson traced to "the sensational success of Rabbi Liebman's book. . . ."[3] Though he saw some value in simple optimism, on the one hand, and psychological science, on the other, Hutchinson finally condemned the "new" religion as the ancient heresy of Pelagianism, which taught that humans were not inherently depraved but could overcome sin through an act of will. Reinhold Niebuhr and the history of the twentieth century, Hutchinson argued, should have put such teachings to rest, yet here it had emerged with renewed vigor in the decade after the war. Protestant Christianity, warned these reactionary voices from within liberal Protestantism, was under assault from the external threat of pluralism and the internal threat of heresy.

Such criticism, from sectors of what remained of the liberal Protestant establishment, must be understood not only as partisanship in narrowly theological disputes—though theological differences were important to these controversies—but also as part of the larger Cold War drive toward national consensus on social, political, and religious matters. Liberalism in its many manifestations in the early Cold War years operated as a powerful force to squelch dissent, religious as well as political. Political commentary, from Arthur Schlesinger's *The Vital Center* (1949) to Daniel Bell's *The End of*

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[2] On Peale, see Carol V. R. George, *God's Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: Religion as Pop Psychology from Mary Baker Eddy to Oral Roberts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

[3] Paul Hutchinson, "Have We a 'New' Religion?" *Life,* April 11, 1955, 143, 144.

Ideology (1960), though not without occasionally sharp analysis of American shortcomings, nevertheless celebrated American democratic capitalism and furthered the push toward consensus.[4] Such impulses obtained in religion as in other arenas of American culture. Reinhold Niebuhr certainly articulated an important critique of liberalism in religion, and of positive-thinking religion in particular, with his insistence on human fallibility and limitation, but ultimately even his forceful, clear, and politically influential voice was unable to carry the day. Niebuhr's theology of paradox proved less viable in the decades after World War II than religious sensibilities, like Peale's, that championed the unlimited possibilities of America and Americans. Positive thinking continued to thrive through the later half of the twentieth century in forms that crossed nearly all boundaries of faith, from New Agers channeling healing power to evangelicals proclaiming their own gospels of health and wealth. Positive thinking prospers in this country, in all its forms, because it is the *ne plus ultra* of American consumer capitalism in religious idiom, and consumer capitalism is the unquestionable bedrock of true Americanism.[5]

Hutchinson's and Niebuhr's critiques of positive-thinking religion failed to gain significant purchase despite their important insights. The lingering hostility in liberal

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[4] See Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 130-147.

[5] Scholars have, for some time, fruitfully applied economic models to early American religion, yet the insightfulness of these studies need not mitigate the argument that American religious life has become *even more* amenable to consumerist approaches with the psychological and positive-thinking turn of the twentieth century. See especially Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992) and R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Protestantism toward pluralism in general, and Roman Catholicism in particular, however, more thankfully died a quick and quiet death. The election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 is often seen as the turning point in Protestant-Catholic relations in the United States, but at least as important was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Vatican II proved a watershed in the history of American Protestantism as surely as it did in Roman Catholicism, for Protestant identity had been forged as a movement of protest against Catholicism, and as Catholicism modernized, Protestants lost the point of origin of their axis of identity. Alongside the revolution in Protestant-Catholic relations initiated by Vatican II, liberal religious Americans in the 1960s also turned with increasing attention toward Asia and its great traditions of faith. The war in Vietnam, and the repeal of racially exclusive immigration laws in 1965, which opened the doors to millions of Asian immigrants, stimulated an increased interest in Buddhism among American Christians and Jews, an interest that had begun more quietly in the 1950s among an avant-garde of writers and intellectuals.[6] By the late twentieth century, the Dalai Lama had become a more revered spiritual leader for many Americans, and a better-selling author, than all but a few Christian authorities. The vast majority of Americans remained Christian, of course, but many no longer saw appropriating practices and insights from other traditions of faith as a threat to their own integrity and identity.

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[6] See John Lardas, *Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late-Twentieth-Century Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Robert S. Ellwood, *Alternative Altars: Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

These significant developments in American religious life were beginning to take shape during the Second World War, and the reactionary period of Cold War consensus culture was not able to suppress them. The religious middlebrow reading culture of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s was instrumental in orienting Americans toward the marketplace for books, and toward mystical and psychological spiritualities. The science of psychology attracted liberal intellectuals toward the end of the nineteenth century with its ambitious agenda to explain religious phenomena in universal terms, and mysticism grew in appeal among these same figures as a means of tempering the materialist and reductionistic implications of psychological science. Together, psychological and mystical spiritualities became the primary religious content of middlebrow culture in the second quarter of the twentieth century. Much of the interfaith dialogue that has occurred in the later half of the twentieth century has occurred on the common ground, and using the common language, of psychological science and mystical contemplation.

The 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were decisive and often overlooked decades in the history of popular religion in the United States, and the print culture of liberal religion—including texts, critical mediation, mechanisms of promotion and distribution, and reader reception—was a powerful engine driving change. Critics have asserted that liberal Protestantism's embrace of psychology was a critical factor in the secularization of American culture in the twentieth century, but the amalgam of psychological and religious paradigms through which most Americans understand themselves and their relation to the divine is best understood as a transformed religion rather than a

secularized form of knowledge.[7] Sociologists and historians of American religion have developed an entire sub-field devoted to exploring the changes in American religious life since the Second World War, employing terms such as "postmodern" and "seeker" to describe the changes. Perhaps the most commonly used term is "therapeutic."[8] The culture of religious reading that emerged in the decades after World War I constitutes a critical early history in the development of American therapeutic culture, and helps connect the elite musings of late-nineteenth-century psychologists such as William James with the popular spirituality of the middle and late twentieth century.

In addition to presenting an accessible religious psychology, religious middlebrow culture also brought mysticism to the masses, and mystical Christianity has played a significant role in late twentieth century movements for social justice. Mystical religion helped lower the walls dividing Protestant and Catholic, black and white, Christian and Jew, and East and West. The African-American writer and clergyman Howard Thurman, for example, arrived at his form of Protestant mysticism under the tutelage of Rufus Jones, and Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949) became a mid-century classic

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[7] See Kevin G. Meador, "'My Own Salvation': The *Christian Century* and Psychology's Secularizing of American Protestantism," in Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2003), 269-309.

[8] The literature here is extensive, but certain landmark texts along the way include: Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby-Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), and *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987) and *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

that greatly influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders of the postwar civil rights movement.[9] In fact, the Congress of Racial Equality, the 1940s interracial civil rights organization that brought the teachings and practices of Gandhian nonviolence to the American civil rights struggle, emerged from the Fellowship for Reconciliation, a Quaker-led pacifist organization, and each of these organizations, and the movements they led, drew spiritual sustenance from religious mysticism. Furthermore, Leigh Eric Schmidt contends that mysticism in mid-century was not only a healing force in American race relations, but "a means of interreligious engagement—a sympathetic meeting point in an increasingly global encounter of religions."[10] Thomas Merton's dialogue with Zen Buddhist contemplatives is but the most famous example of such increasing sympathy and understanding. "Understanding how *mysticism* took on such a wide sense," Schmidt writes, "is an important step in fathoming how *spirituality* itself has now become such an expansive term in the religious vernacular of the twenty-first century."[11] Indeed, the very language we use to define ourselves and our relation to the divine derives in large measure from the discourses of mysticism and psychology, discourses popularized by the reading culture of the mid-twentieth century. Popular religious reading in mid-century certainly presented to the American public much that was insipid, banal, and politically quiescent. But at its best, in the writings of Rufus Jones,

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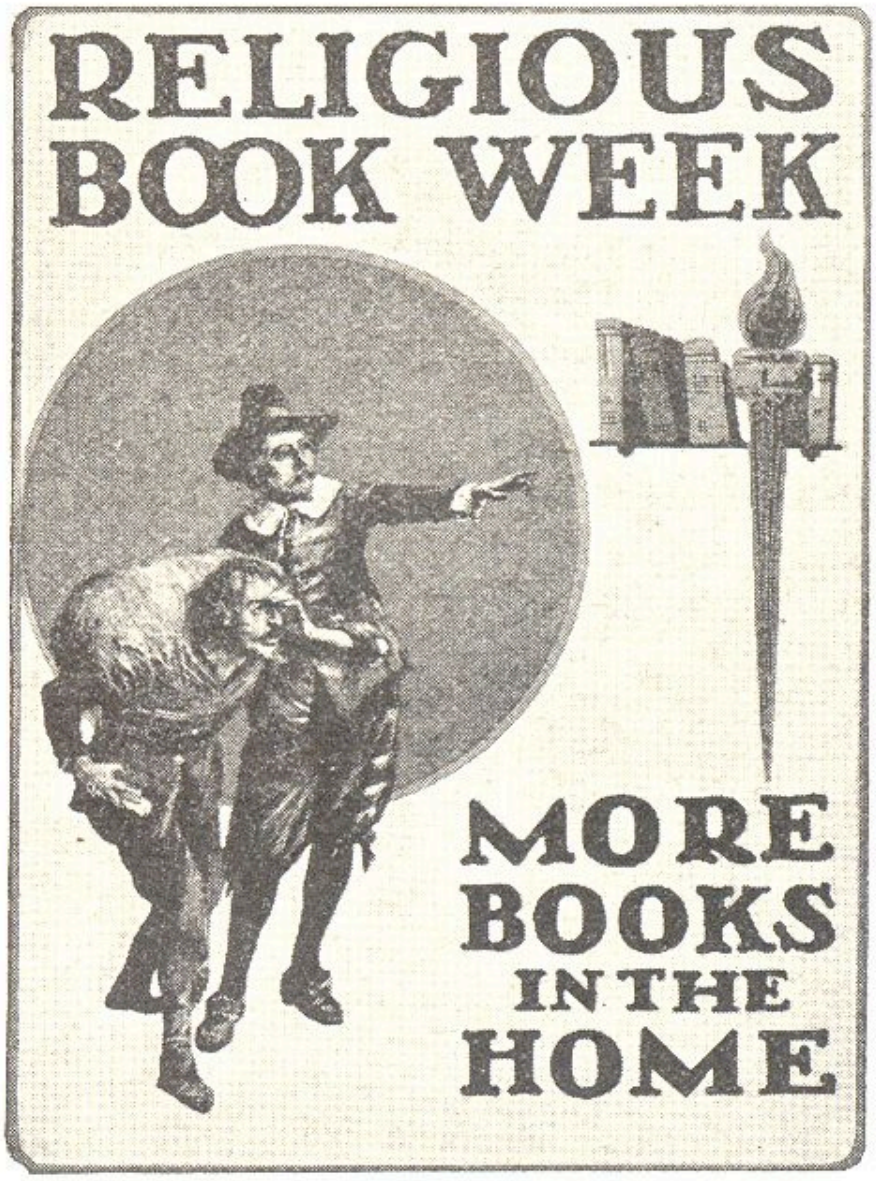
[9] On Jones and Thurman, see Matthew S. Hedstrom, "Rufus Jones and Mysticism for the Masses," *CrossCurrents* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 31-44; and Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 559-566.

[10] Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism'," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (June 2003): 290.

[11] Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism'," 276.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, Joshua Loth Liebman, Thomas Merton, and Howard Thurman, religious middlebrow culture in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s provided millions of modern Americans with the intellectual tools and spiritual resources to lead happier lives, and to build a more peaceful and just world.

Figures



A RELIGIOUS BOOK-WEEK POSTER.

Figure 1.1. Religious Book Week poster, 1921. From *The Baptist*, March 5, 1921.

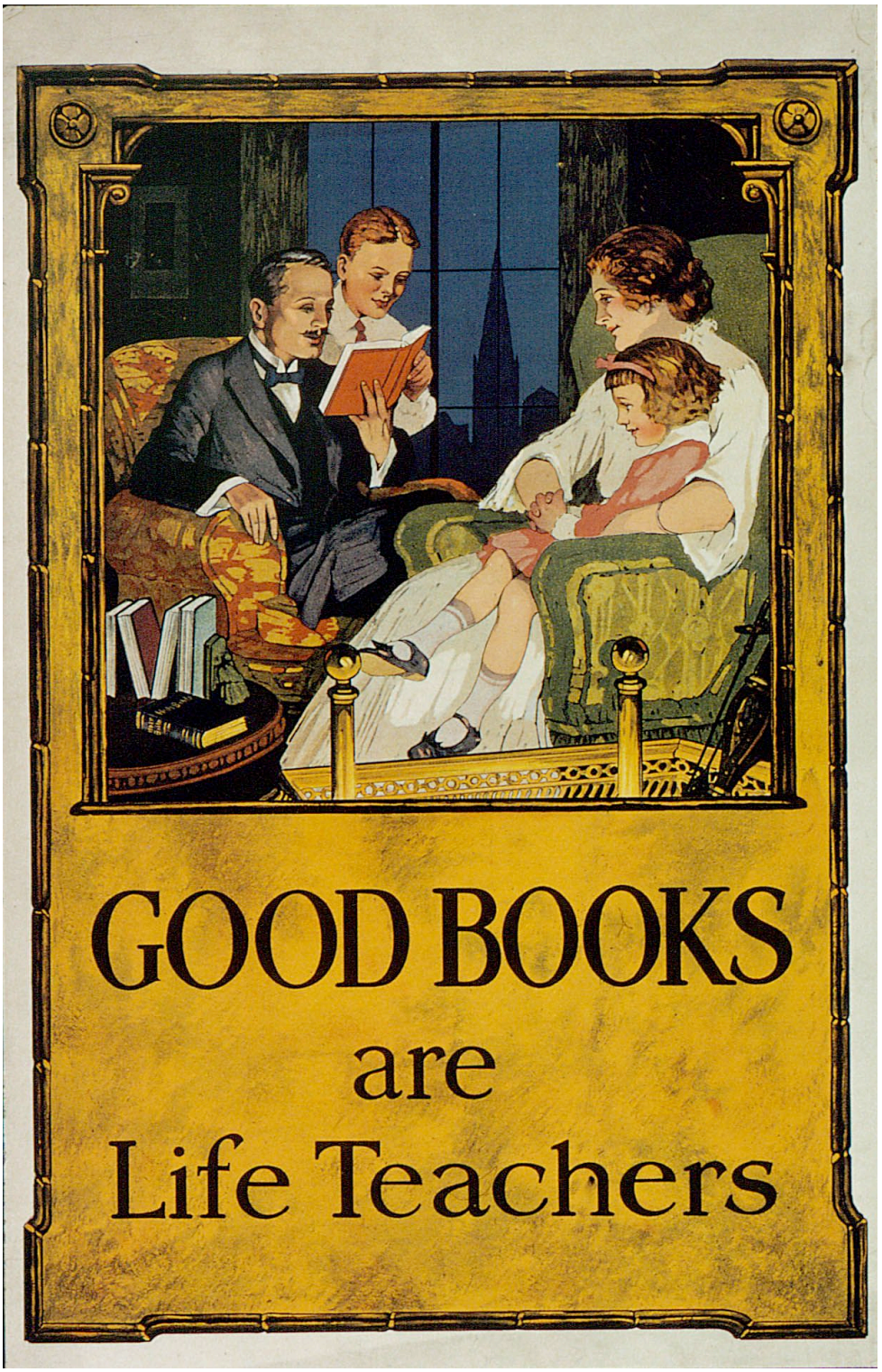


Figure 1.2. Religious Book Week Poster, 1922. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Figure 1.3. Children's Book Week poster, 1919-1923. New York Public Library.

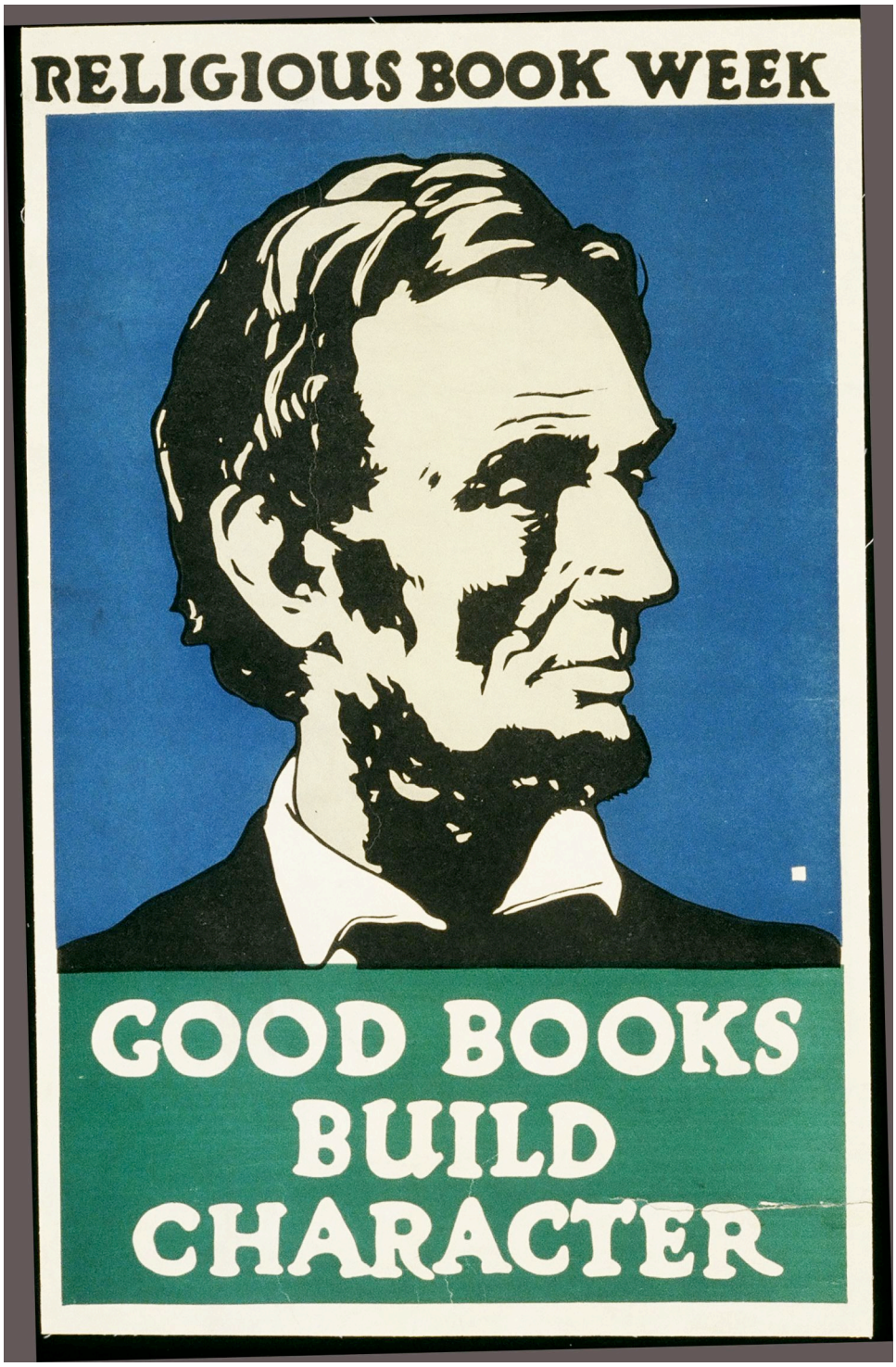


Figure 1.4. Charles Buckles "C.B." Falls's poster for Religious Book Week, 1923-1926. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

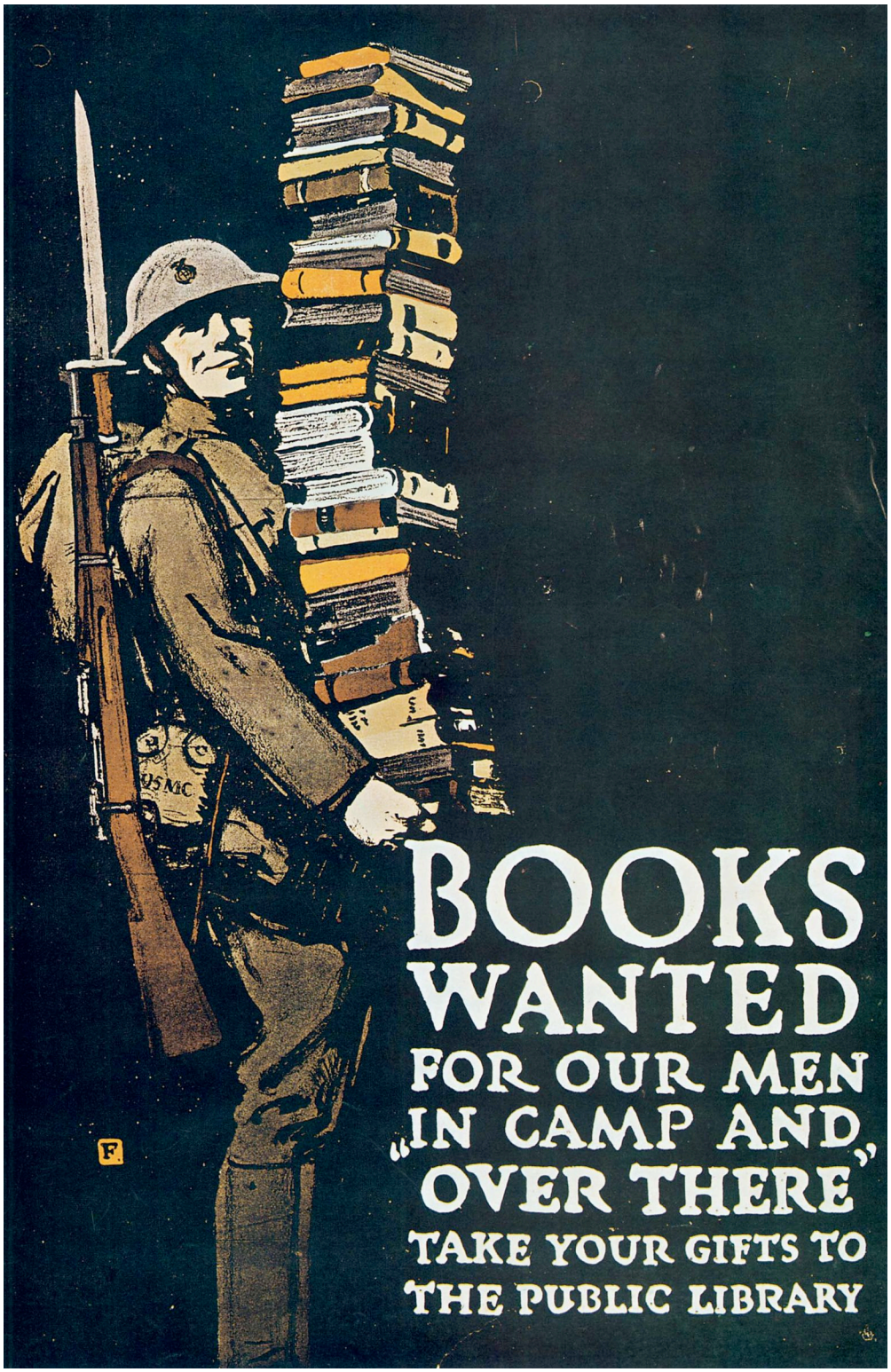
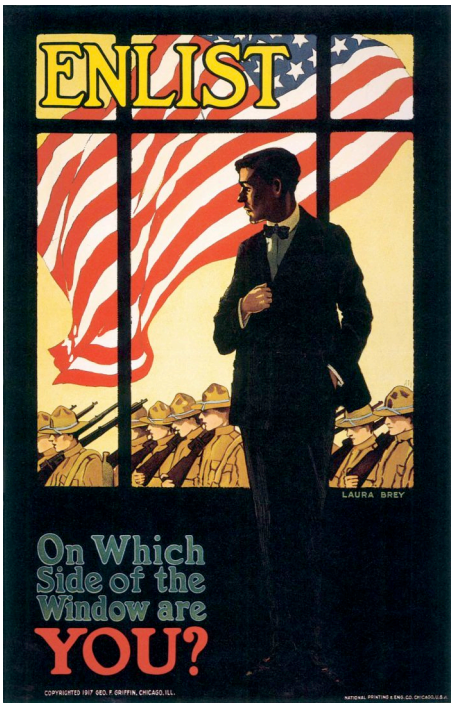


Figure 1.5. C. B. Falls, 1918. University of Minnesota Libraries.



Figures 1.6 and 1.7. World War I recruiting posters. University of Minnesota Libraries

Figure 1.8. World War I recruiting poster. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

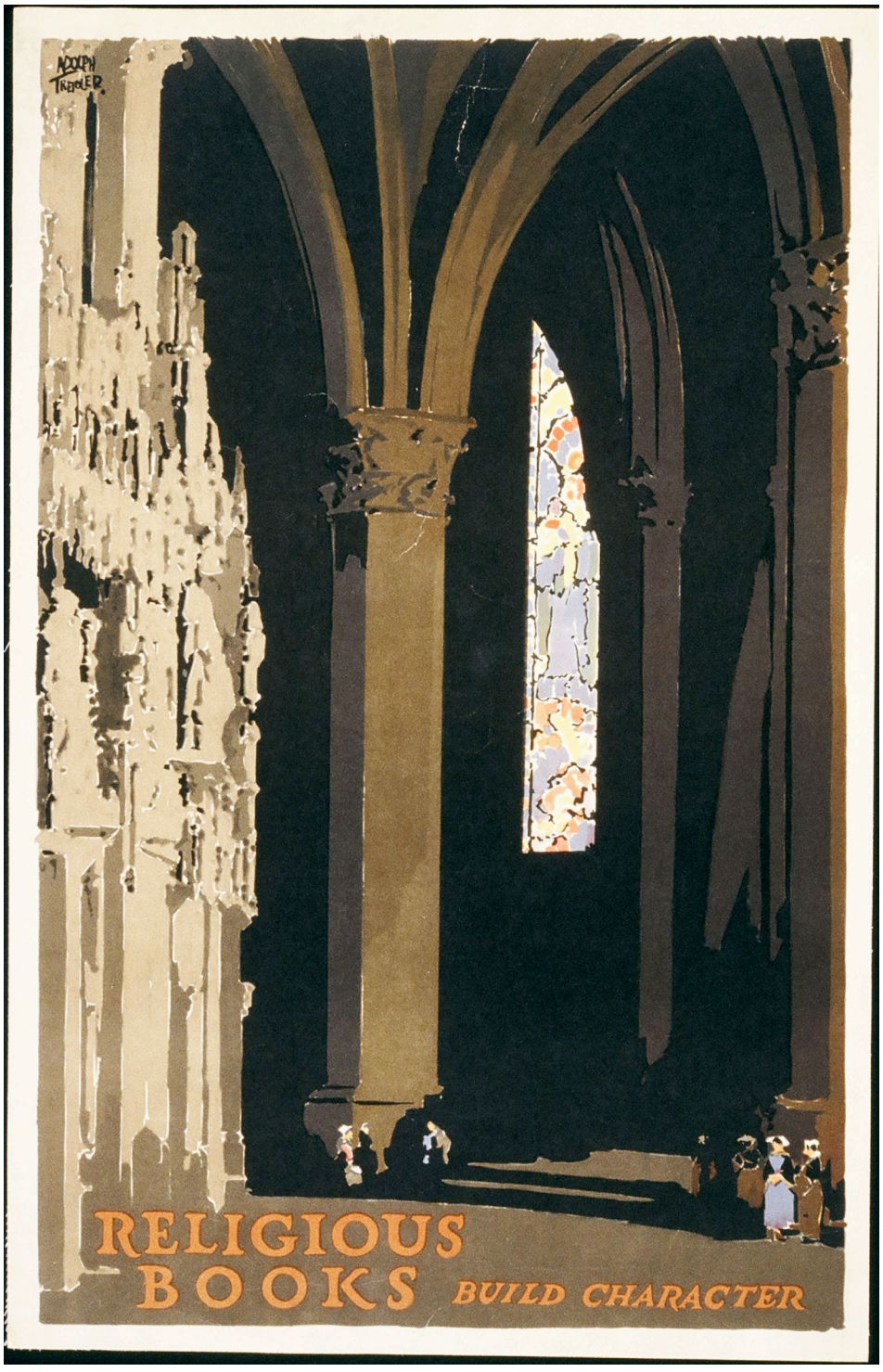


Figure 1.9. Adolph Treidler's poster for Religious Book Week, 1927. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Figure 4.1. Victory Book Campaign posters from World War II. Kittleson Collection, Special Collections Department, Minneapolis Public Library.

Figure 4.2. Council on Books in Wartime poster, 1942. Kittleson Collection, Special Collections Department, Minneapolis Public Library.

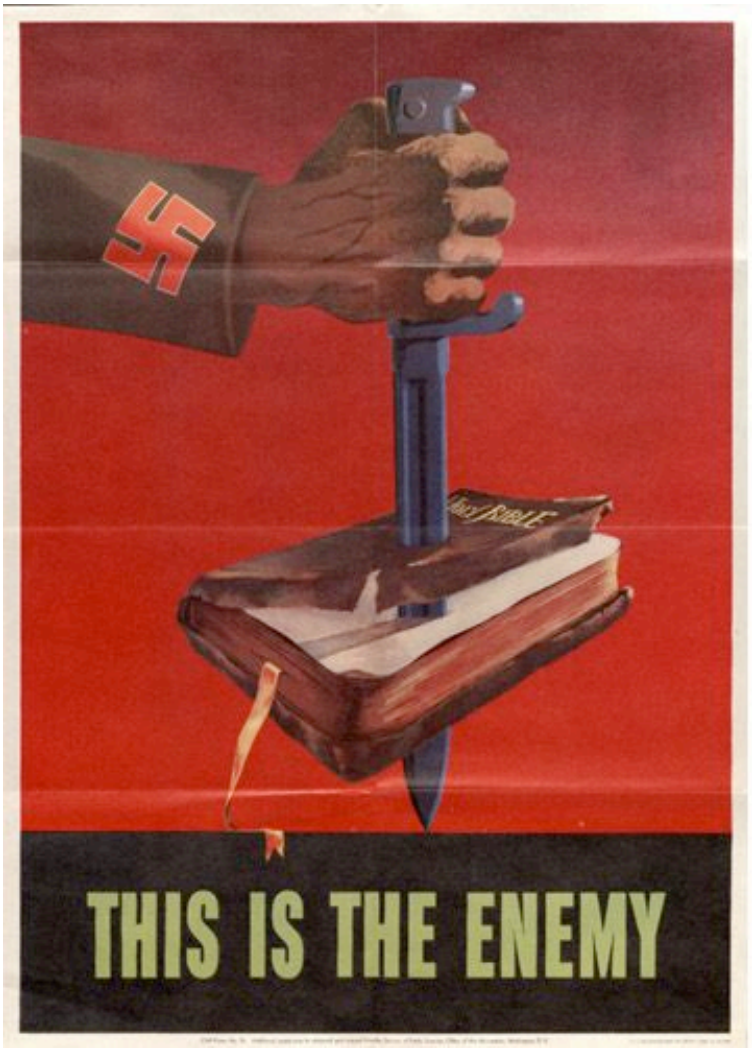
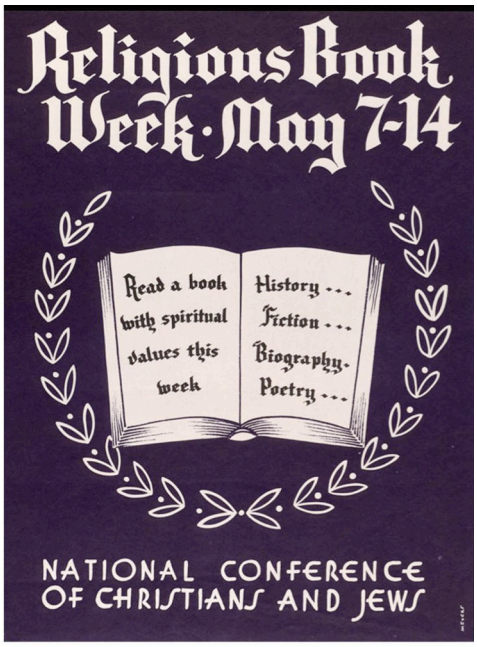


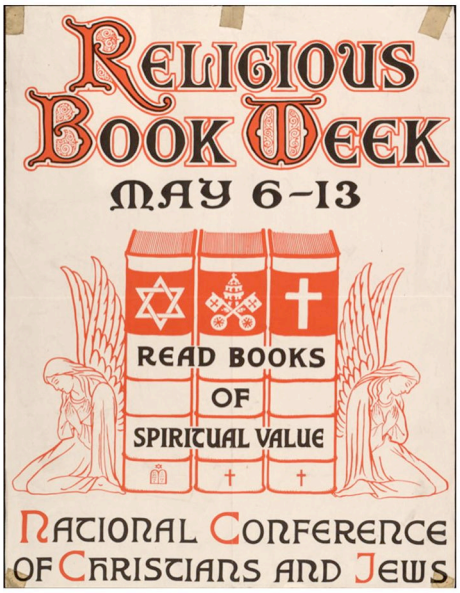
Figure 4.3. Office of War Information poster, 1943. Kittleson Collection, Special Collections Department, Minneapolis Public Library.

Figure 4.4. Brotherhood Week posters, from 1943 and 1945, National Conference of Christians and Jews. University of Minnesota Libraries.

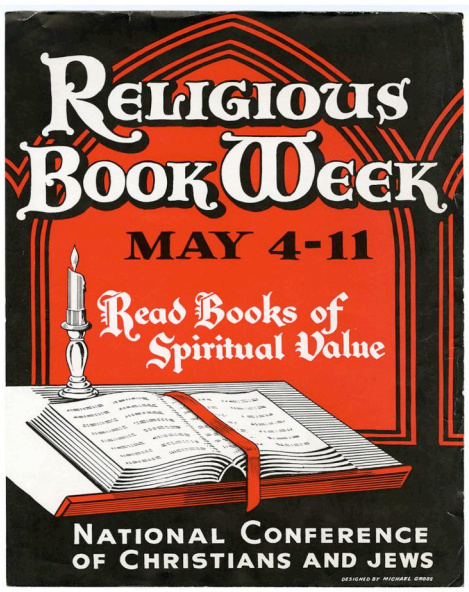
1943



1944



1945 and 1946



1947 and 1948

Figure 4.5. Religious Book Week posters, 1943 through 1948, National Conference of Christians and Jews. (The 1945 and 1946 posters, and the 1947 and 1948 posters, were identical except for the dates.) University of Minnesota Libraries.

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Rufus M. Jones Papers, Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library Special Collections, Haverford, PA.
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